CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview of the Study

The study makes an attempt to explore learner strategies in large ESL classes at the tertiary level in India and identify the factors/variables that may influence the use of these strategies. Therefore, an effort has been made in this study to examine the language learning environment of a large ESL class and investigate the learners' processes of language learning.

The main assumption of this study is that large ESL classes in India are marked by idiosyncratic characteristics that arise out of the prevailing socio-cultural and socio-educational contexts, and therefore call for a different approach to the learning of English. Consequently, a range of interrelated factors presumably interact with the learning environment of a large class. Therefore, the strategies which would be used by learners in the large ESL classes in India are likely to be different from those listed in the available taxonomies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990) in related literature.

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In order to enable an investigation into the use of learner strategies, the factors that influence their use, and also the language learning environment of a large class, an Integrated Model of classroom second language learning has been developed. In order to arrive at this model, the different theories of language learning/acquisition - general as well as first and second language theories, the current state of knowledge on learner factors and the learning context, i.e., the second language classroom have been examined.

A case study approach has been adopted to investigate the research issues so as to gain more insights into the learner behaviour and the process of language learning in a large class.

1.1 Background to the Study

Although work on the effect of class size on achievement has been carried out for a very long time now (Fleming 1959; Siegel et.al. 1960; Ryan, Greenfield and Barr 1975; Lindbloom 1977; Glass et.al. 1978, Smith and Glass 1980; Shapson et.al. 1980; Feldman 1984; McGee 1986, 1991; McKeachie 1986; Bolton 1988; Gibbs and Jenkins 1992), research on its effect on language learning has been completely neglected. Even when most learners
learn a second language in the context of the classroom rather than in naturalistic situations, the significance of the effect of class size on language learning has been overlooked in most discussions of the variables affecting second language learning.

Coleman (1989a) cites personal communication with Peter Hubbard who quoted Jon Roberts as saying that the issue of large classes has not been a concern in the area of English Language Teaching because (a) it is not 'theoretically interesting' and (b) it is insoluble: the only solution is to avoid having large classes.

The spurt of interest in the phenomenon of class size in the area of second language learning a decade ago had mainly emanated from the fact that non-native practitioners of English, especially from the third world countries, on their TEFL training courses in Britain, often complained that the methodologies of the West which originated from relatively privileged teaching/learning situations were not applicable in the classrooms of their home countries where "the teacher is a non-native speaker, the learners are already multilingual (in local and regional languages), and many learners are crammed into the classroom" (Coleman 1991a:2). An offshoot of this dissatisfaction was the setting up of the Language Learning in Large Classes Research
Project (LCRP) in 1986. (For an overview of the Project, see Coleman 1989a.) Although there are some isolated studies (Forrester 1964; Long 1977; Hubbard et.al 1983; Nolasco and Arthur 1986, 1988, etc.) which identify problems of language teaching/learning in large classes and provide solutions to these problems, the LCRP is the only large scale research carried out to investigate the relationship between large classes and language learning.

The major concern of the LCRP was with the administering of two questionnaires, the 'numbers' questionnaire, which investigated teachers' perceptions of class size and the 'difficulties' questionnaire, which looked at teachers' perceptions of the difficulties involved in teaching large classes.

The findings of the 'numbers' questionnaire revealed that there is no universal conception of the size of ideal, small or large classes. The 'difficulties' questionnaire established that large classes are problematic for teachers in various ways - pedagogical, planning, classroom management, evaluation, the management of affective factors and effort needed. According
to Coleman (1989b), some of these problems arise because teachers are unrealistic in what they want to do in large classes.

However, the LCRP studies were criticized on many grounds, the principal one being the methodology adopted for research, namely questionnaires, and the analysis of findings where the data ... is pigeon-holed into predetermined categories ... That done, the percentages are allowed to proclaim the results" (Tickoo 1992:5). The second criticism is whether it is really possible to identify "one variable such as size within an interactive classroom environment when there are so many variables?" (Peachey 1989). A third, yet very relevant criticism is that "people who complain about 'large' classes ... are perhaps really only trying to find a plausible excuse for a general, if understandable, reluctance to rethink their whole approach to language pedagogy" (Allwright 1989).

One major solution to the problems of large classes that seems to be hinted at in the LCRP studies and the resultant criticism is that the teachers should rehaul their methodology to promote effective learning in large classes. This need for methodological changes in teaching in large ESL classes has also been reported in the work done in the Indian context. Natraj
(1989) advocated 'group method techniques', Singh (1990) suggested a package of useful teaching techniques, and Venkatalakshmi (1991) provided alternate teaching techniques that could be integrated into the lecture mode used by teachers. Although Kumar (1992) and another study conducted by the researcher (Usha Prasad 1992) have explored classroom interaction and communication in classes of different sizes, including large and small, the implications seem to be similar to those that are suggested by Natraj, Singh and Venkatalakshmi, namely, the need for changes in teacher methodology. This is concomitant with what Coleman (1987a) implies when he says that the conventional 'teaching spectacle' should be abandoned in favour of a 'learning festival' (For a distinction between 'spectacle' and 'festival' see Handelman 1982 and for its application in classroom SLA see Coleman 1987), which involves an interactive task based approach to teaching large classes where learners adopt completely new modes of classroom behaviour as they carry out the tasks (Coleman 1987a). A similar 'teacher-fronted interactive mode' of teaching has been tried out by Naidu et.al (1992) in the Indian context to combat with the problem of heterogeneity in large ESL classes in India.
A major part of research done on the issue of class size and second language learning is thus biased towards teachers, their perceptions and difficulties, and pedagogical solutions (Forrester 1968; Long 1977; Coleman 1989b; Nolasco and Arthur 1986, 1988; Duppenthaler 1991; Gaudart 1991; George 1991; Safnil 1991; Sarwar 1991) aimed at helping teachers teach effectively in a large class. Apart from a few studies on learner perceptions (Locastro 1989), learner behaviour (Khan 1995) and learner strategies (Coleman 1991b, 1991c; Locastro 1994), language learning in large classes has largely been ignored. Furthermore, the research literature in SLA abounds with many studies that have investigated the interrelationship between learner variables and learning processes and strategies, but most of these studies relate to language learning outside the classroom. Hardly has any attempt been made to systematically observe learners to see how they learn in the classroom learning contexts, especially in large classes.

It was, therefore, felt that there is a definite need to explore how learners learn a second language in the context of a large class, what are the strategies they use to do so and whether these strategies are different from those identified in the research on learner strategies outside the classroom.
1.2 Rationale of the Study

In India, the 'universalisation' of education after independence provided access to education for all which led to the overcrowding of classrooms at all levels, especially at the post-secondary or intermediate level. This issue has been undermined by various policy making bodies and Commissions on general education as well as by research in the area of ELT in India. An extensive body of research in SLA in the Indian context includes the areas of bilingual education, teacher education, curriculum development and planning, reading and writing skills. However, very little emphasis has been laid on the learning process in the classroom. For instance, there is hardly any comprehensive study which has looked at a large English class in all its complexity and studied the language learning environment available therein, and its effect on how learners learn and what strategies they deploy to enhance their learning. Most published work on strategies has been carried out in ESL programmes in North American University settings, immigrant students being the informants. It is indeed questionable that the strategies identified on the basis of such studies can be applied to Indian L2 learners in classroom settings.
It is now widely accepted that we need to look for solutions to a problem in the context where the problems occur rather than from an outside source. Thus, training Indian L learners to adopt learner strategies identified in alien contexts may not suit their learning styles or approaches because (1) the Indian large class is idiosyncratic on account of the social context in which it is placed and (2) "methodologies are not going to work beyond the familiar domains in which they are created" (Holliday 1994:3). Therefore, instead of importing "BANA [Britain, Australia and North America] technology" (Holliday 1994) and making difficult and sometimes incongruous adaptations in our large classes, we need to evolve our own 'appropriate' methodology, i.e., the strategies that suit our learning context best through 'thick description' of Indian large classes. This is possible only through a systematic enquiry into our problem.

Therefore, in this study, an attempt has been made to explore strategies that learners' use for language learning in large ESL classes by adopting a case study approach. It is hoped that the study will have pedagogical implications as well as implications for learner training.
1.3 Statement of the Problem

The study aims to (i) identify learner strategies used in the context of learning a second language in a large class, (ii) the various factors that are likely to influence the use of such strategies and (iii) whether these strategies are similar/different to the strategies reported in the literature on learning strategies.

Therefore, the central question which this study addresses itself to is:

What strategies do learners use in the context of large ESL classes at the tertiary level in India?

The secondary research questions are:

1. What variables/factors influence the use of learner strategies in a large class?

2. Are there substantial differences between the strategies used in large classes and those identified in the research literature on learner strategies?
1.4 Method of Investigation

In order to deal with the main research questions raised in this study, a need was felt for a general description of how second languages are learnt in instructional contexts and the variables that influence language learning. This description was arrived at through an extensive review of available literature on first and second language learning theories, the variables affecting learning and the second language teaching/learning context. This review allowed us to arrive at an Integrated Model of classroom second language learning.

The study entailed an ethnographic case study approach to explore the strategies used by learners of large ESL classes, as it was felt that this would provide more insights into the learner behaviour and language learning processes. Therefore, we needed to adopt tools that would help us carry out our investigation over a length of time. Thus, available research instruments were examined and only those methods that were thought to be feasible in a large class context were tried out in the preliminary investigation. Also, in the preliminary study, large and small English classes, and large English medium and large regional medium classes were studied to examine the
perceptions of teachers and learners regarding class size. Following the preliminary study, it was decided that the main study should be confined to one large ESL class at the tertiary level. In the main study which was conducted over a period of fourteen weeks, research instruments such as classroom observation, audio-recording of classroom interaction, learner questionnaire, teacher and learner interviews, uptake study and a structured diary study were employed to explore the strategies used in the large class. The conclusions of the study were arrived at by collating the data obtained through the various tools and by providing a descriptive analyses of the data.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study approaches the research problems mainly from the learners' perspective. This study focusses mainly on the learning process although it does incidentally examine the instructional process as learning inside the classroom is the likely consequence of instruction.

The study is delimited as it is confined to the tertiary level of education. The tertiary level was chosen as it represents a transitional stage between the school and university after which the learners may join professional courses such as
engineering, medicine, law, agriculture etc., or proceed for advanced academic courses. Also the intermediate/post-secondary level offers a remedial course in English to cater to the future needs of these students. We, therefore, felt it would be useful to study the learning process at this stage. Moreover, the class size at this stage is unusually large and the experience of learning at this stage may act as a springboard for learning at a later stage.

The study deals with regional medium learners. No attempt is made to simulate a large class: the learning situation is observed and described as it is. Also no preconceived categories/parameters are used for the analysis of the data.

1.6 Organization of the Study

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to introduce the study, present the background and the rationale for the study, state the central problem, outline the method of investigation and define its scope. In Chapter II, the theoretical background to the study is provided in order to arrive at an integrated model of language learning. In Chapter III, the findings of the preliminary study are reported and their implications for the main
study are traced. Also the research tools used for the main study are presented. Chapter IV, presents the data and the findings of the main study. In Chapter V, the integrated model for classroom second language learning presented in Chapter II is discussed in the light of the findings of the main study. Finally, the conclusions and implications of the study are stated.

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