CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I Background

This study aims at finding facts about comprehension of English at undergraduate level for Arts students who have to study English as a compulsory subject for three years for graduation. The students have to study different genres like prose, novels, short stories and drama - and poetry of different periods. Prose is written in a straight, matter of fact way, whereas the writing of poetry requires compact linguistic presentation. That way any literary form uses special language ranging from different registers and styles. Poetry is regarded as the highest form of language cultivated by the poet for his expression. Again the cultivated language of different poets belonging to different periods of literary history also shows variation in diction, syntax, and contents. Therefore the present study has been concentrated on the comprehension of poems selected from English and Marathi languages to test comprehension ability in the First and the Second Language. The five poems selected belong to preromantic, romantic and post-romantic period of English poetry. These poems can be found prescribed for the undergraduate courses not only in our university but the other universities of the country. Therefore we can call them 'popular' or 'favourite' poems of the syllabus designers. Some of these poems or other poems by the selected poets are necessarily studied by the students up to the first year B.A. level. The comprehension tests were administered to B.A. part one, B.A. part two and B.A. part three students. They
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include boys and girls, studying compulsory and optional English for their graduation. The selected poems -

i> 'Break, break, break' - Lord Alfred Tennyson,

ii> 'One word is too often profaned' - P. B. Shelley,

iii> 'When you are old - - - - ' - W. B. Yeats,

iv> 'The Tiger' - William Blake,

v> 'The Solitary Reaper' - William Wordsworth,

have popular recognition with the teachers and the students of English (Appendix A 11). They are therefore representative, in the sense that they belong to different periods, different poets and reveal different life experiences, like 'spiritual love' (When you are old), 'love for nature and common man' (The Solitary reaper), 'Love for God' (One word is too often profaned), 'expression of sorrow and personal loss' (Break, break, break) and 'worldly experiences' (The Tiger). These poetic experiences and feelings are expected to be understood while studying these poems at the undergraduate level.

The selection of Marathi poems tallies with the selection procedure of the English poems. The Marathi poems belong to the modern period of Marathi. The Marathi and English poems suggest a modern and romantic strain, for example, the Marathi poem 'Audumbara' by Balakavi Thombare, 'Lakeratana' by C. T. Khancakara, 'Mrutyula Mhanato Sabura' by Yasavanta; 'Devajine Karuna Keli' by B.S. Mardhekar and 'Sadbance Isvara' by Narayana Surve (See Appendix A 1). The first three poems can be called romantic poems on the analogy of English romantic poems. The last two belong to the modern period of Marathi poetry. These two
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poems differ from the early three poems on the grounds of obscurity. All these poems repeatedly find some place in the anthologies prescribed for the undergraduate students. Therefore it is presumed that students have first hand knowledge of these poems. Each poem differs from the other if we consider the difficulty level - a point which will help us in fixing the comprehension level of poems in the mother tongue of the students. The poems are given in the Appendix (A I).

The present study aims at testing comprehension of poetry ultimately leading to testing language proficiency that is competence and performance (Chomsky, 1957). Therefore along with English poems we have given Marathi poems for testing comprehension. This was done with a view to compare and reveal the facts about comprehension in the first language (Marathi) and the second language (English) of the students. Marathi is learnt by the same students (that is those learning English for seven years) for thirteen years. It is the Mother tongue of the undergraduate students both from rural and urban areas. Marathi is taught and learnt as the first language and it is also the language of daily communication. Therefore the competence and performance of the students as far as the first language, mother tongue is concerned, has got to be different from the competence performance of the second language (English). Hence it became necessary to compare the comprehension ability of the students, in the first language and the second language, to establish whether or not it is different. Because theoretically the competence performance of the first language differs from that of the second language. It is
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presumed that such type of comparison should reveal some basic facts about comprehension or lack of comprehension and lead to some pedagogical considerations. This study will also focus on whether or not the comprehension ability and language learning supplement each other or they move away or contradict each other. It is believed that the fact revealed in the study will be useful both for teachers and students of first language and second language.

The selection of poems from English and Marathi is at random but the poets are not selected at random because they find their place in the syllabi. These poets are often included in most of the anthologies published from time to time for study at the undergraduate level in the Universities. Other poems written by the same poets are also prescribed at the undergraduate levels. These poems that we have chosen are fairly representative and popular of these poets. But the poems share some common features like depiction of nature, subjectivity, sadness, love, modern life experiences, losses, sorrow, pain and obscurity. These poetic experiences find parallels to the experiences of the students at the undergraduate level. Therefore it is expected that the poetic experiences should find proper responses from the students while comprehending these poems.

Every topic of research requires a well defined methodology in order to administer any test to get maximum positive results. Therefore we have to adopt a suitable field methodology. We have prepared a format of questionnaire suitable for testing comprehension. The questions framed are such that they should elicit four types of answers,
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i) correct, ii) incorrect, iii) near to correct, and iv) no answers, to any one of the four types. The elaborate methodology and the testing procedures are explained in the forthcoming Chapters.

We have prepared model answers to all the questions so that there is no chance left while assessing the answers.

These tests are administered in urban and rural colleges. From the smallest rural college at Bodawad Dist. Jalgaon, to the biggest urban college like Ferguson and Modern College at Pune. The administration of the test was done with prior permission of the colleges with well advanced information about the work to be done. We received good response from all the colleges so far as the administration was concerned.

The collected data was tabulated from different angles for example - a table for correct, incorrect, near to correct and no answers. The collegewise data has also been prepared. In order to show comparative attainment we have prepared the table of rural and urban colleges. We also prepared tables for individual poems both in English and Marathi. The data has been analyzed graphically in order to present the whole picture of the study at a glance.

The interpretation of data has been done on the basis of the ten difficulties listed by I. A. Richards in his 'Practical Criticism'. In fact these ten difficulties have been the measuring scale of achievements or failures not only of our students but also to measure the validity of our methodology and show lack of comprehension of poetry. Since
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this is the basis of our study, we have been very scrupulous in presenting and interpreting the data in Chapter 7.

The concluding chapter of the thesis normally proves the validity and the utility of the research project. The comprehension ability of the students has been discussed quite elaborately in this chapter. The chapter on comprehension draws heavily on four considerations - (i) the theories of learning (ii) the theories of language learning, learning of second language, interference of first language, bilingualism, (iii) reasons for understanding or the lack of understanding or lack of comprehension resulting from the answers of the students and finally (iv) our findings.

In order to establish the authenticity and the validity of the test, we administered a verification test separately in order to ensure whether our conclusions are dependable or not. We selected one poem from Marathi and one from English. The questions are strictly based on the ten difficulties of L. A. Richards which we noticed in the responses of our students. The poems selected for verification test are unlike the previous poems in the sense that they are from modern poets. The English poem 'Harry Pearce' is written by the Australian poet, David Campbell. The Marathi poem by Vinda Karandikara 'Una Hivayatila Sirasirata'. For the administration of this test we selected two colleges, one rural and one urban that is Shirpur and Nasik. It was administered with 20 students and all of them had to answer questions on Marathi as well as English poems. The results of this test prove that the conclusions drawn earlier are not different. Therefore there is a strong point
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to assert that our earlier test was built on proper lines and was valid.
The explanations, the analysis, the results, the theories used and the conclusions drawn in the following chapters will testify the claim of the research project.

II Comprehension

Comprehension consists in reception, perception and understanding. These are the mental processes or mentalistic activities which take us to the comprehension. It can be defined as general or non verbal and literary or verbal comprehension. General comprehension means the understanding, grasping, squeezing the meaning of an object, thing, picture, sound, taste, smell etc. Verbal comprehension means understanding, seizing, grasping the meaning of spoken or written texts.

It is a mentalistic activity which develops with the maturational age. This progressive emergence of learning is directly linked with the progressive emergence of cognitive and physical stabilisation. The physical, cognitive and linguistic milestones are correlated. The progressive emergence of language in children from the first month to the third year shows the non verbal adoptive behaviour. From the first week to 16 months the child develops non verbal adoptive behaviour.

Thus in the comprehension process the first stage is reception.
Reception

Reception means responding to what is seen or heard. The one month old child responds to the sound and shows a reflex smile to the mother's voice. It is an innate and initial mental activity through which the reception takes place. A two month old child attends to the speaking voice and shows signs that he is aware of his own sounds. A three month old child is aware of visual and auditory stimuli in the environment.

In the fourth month some non verbal expressive signals are acquired. The child is able to identify the auditory direction and responds to the noise and voice by turning his head in the appropriate direction. In the beginning the child responds to the non verbal elements like sound, the voice of the mother etc. This may be called a non verbal reception. Then the verbal reception develops and the child responds to the words uttered by the mother.

Thus reception is a basic, initial mental activity, which may be called the recognition level. Reception can be verbal or non verbal. For example listening is auditory reception and reading is visual reception. The use of language is receptive. In the reception process nervous stimulation arises first in the receptor and then gets transformed to the brain which begins to function.

We find that the reception is the basic, initial and innate process and the first stage which leads us towards perception. The next stage is comprehension. Without reception the further activities of perception, understanding and comprehension cannot take place. Response to a verbal or
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non verbal item is a must. It is a psychological process closely linked, interrelated with physical, cognitive and linguistic, maturational developing age.

Perception

Perception is the next stage in the comprehension process. It is a psychological potency. Perception means the subjective reflection of the objective reality. It represents the reflection in our consciousness of various properties or qualities of an external object. Our subjective experiences of colour, of the pitch or timbre of voice, of warm or cold, touch etc. can and must be considered perceptions. Man and animal both sense not only the various properties and characteristics but also the links and relationships, characteristics of these objects. All the percepts of links and relationship have just a sensory character.

For example redness and yellowness are our sensory perceptions which show that we have a perception of colour. In addition to these perceptions of red and yellow colour we also feel or sense the qualitative differences between these two. External stimuli evoke different nervous, physiological changes which are reflected in the mind as intellectual feelings or mental perceptions. We immediately feel the degree and kind of difference between them, for example, one is white and the other is black. We feel (sense) this difference.

In perception it is necessary to have sensory impression and feeling. The process of recognizing things
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starts with the recognition of the appropriate intellectual feeling or of the sensation which always precedes thought and enables thought to be formed.

Thus sensory reflection of the real links objects with intuition. Real links and relationships can be reflected intuitively as well as consciously. With the help of these mental sensations or intellectual feelings one can intuitively recognize the most widely differing links and relationships. Intuitive knowledge can remain sensory that is conscious, when the links and relationships of senses (or feels) are not consciously realised. For example a 'word' always has some sense or meaning. It expresses a concept present in one's consciousness, at the moment when one uses this word. And a word has a definite meaning which is conditioned by the way in which the word can be related to the object it denotes. A word is a sign for a thing. It directs our attention to some item or to some aspect of an item. Thus a person has a semantic feeling - (i) Feeling for word's sense and (ii) Feeling for word's meaning.

The perception process starts at the age of six months. In the sixth month the child distinguishes between friendly and angry talk. A seventh month child pays attention to the speech of persons around him and his family members. He listens to his own private vocalizations and enjoys imitating sound sequences. He is able to vocalize emotional satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This may be called nonverbal type of perception. Speech acts can be inflected by more or less direct perception of visual image. In man such perception is always mediated through words or other
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procedures. It is internal programming of verbal utterance.

In verbal perception the words or written texts are followed by the child. Thus perceptions are private judgments of experience. It means the capacity of the mind to perceive. Perception is a sensory understanding which is brought into action by concrete stimuli.

Information is filtered by the perceptual process according to the characteristics which events have in common. The filtered information is then absorbed into memory which is a short term storage mechanism. There are three stages in the perception process.

i) Identification of words, phrases, logical and modifying terms.

ii) Selection - holding facts in memory, and

iii) Automatic Recognition - the child begins to look a normal instrument for communication.

Thus through reception, response, identification, selection and automatic response, the perception takes place and leads to understanding, the next stage in comprehension.

Understanding

Understanding is the third stage in the mental process of comprehension. Generally understanding starts at the age of 12 months to 18 months. The child understands phrases, simple grammatical patterns and responds in action to commands.

I.A. Richards in his Practical Criticism has defined understanding as:
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First Primitive sense - When nothing whatever happens in our minds beyond the mere perception of sound or shape of words as we do not understand them.

Comparatively any thought or feeling or impulses stirred into activity by words and seemingly directed towards which the words represent are beginnings of understanding, for example, in this primitive sense it is possible that a dog or horse may come to understand a few words or phrases.

In the more developed instance the words prompt in us action or emotion appropriate to the attitude of a person who speaks them. Animals also achieve this level. When we address children we expect this degree of understanding. At the same level understanding implies some degree of intellectual discrimination.

We are required to distinguish the thought invited by words from other thoughts more or less like it. Words may mean 'This'... or ...'That'. Thus the precision of thought is invited. Thus understanding means grasping the sense, feeling, tone and intention, realizing the significance and seizing the meaning. Thoughtful reading gives understanding and out of understanding appreciation, and out of appreciation a new approach to thinking, that is comprehension.

The understanding is conscious perception conditioned by the activity which functions only under the influence of verbal stimuli. This may be called a verbal understanding. The perception which is felt intuitively reflected in the form of specific intellectual feeling or sensation, which
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involves the reflection of these links and relationships in the form of concepts and judgments directly united with the form of language. Thus understanding is always verbally logical. Intuitive perception is never a true understanding but only its sensory basis.

Thus understanding is a mental process in language acquisition as well as in perceiving objects. Understanding the words, texts, written or spoken language is verbal understanding and understanding the sound, picture, taste, smell etc. is called non verbal type of understanding.

The perfect understanding involves - (i) an accurate direction of thought, (ii) correct evocation of feeling, and (iii) an exact apprehension of tone, precise recognition of intention.

Distinction between Perception and Understanding

Both are fundamental processes in the subjective reflection of the objective world.

A person has two signal systems of which the first is brought into action by concrete stimuli; while the second functions only under the influence of verbal stimuli. Thus the verbal and non verbal perception and understanding processes take place.

On this basis distinction is made between perception and understanding. Perception is a sensory understanding limited to the activity of the first signal system. Understanding is a conscious perception conditioned by the activity of the second signal system.
The difference between perception and understanding of objective links and relationships consists in the fact that, with perception they are only felt intuitively. (that is, are reflected in the form of specific intellectual feeling or sensation). Whereas understanding involves the reflection of the links and relationships in the form of concepts and judgments directly united with the forms of language.

So understanding is always verbally logical or ratiocinative thinking, whereas intuitive perception is never true understanding but only its sensory basis. Thus understanding is the most important stage in comprehension which develops out of reception and perception and leads to comprehension.

Comprehension

Comprehension starts at the age of 24 to 30 months. The child does not understand many specific words but develops functional equivalents of comprehension. Between 30 to 36 months the comprehension of sentence structure, syllable sequences and prosody develops speedily. The child comprehends time words and identifies action in pictures. He can listen to longer stories. He understands the semantic difference in subject-object, the position of the noun etc.

Comprehension means the act or process of comprising, the faculty or capability including the act or action of grasping with the intellect, understanding knowledge gained by comprehending, the capacity for understanding fully. Comprehension develops thinking which expresses or achieves...
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the knowledge of particular object.

It is one of the basic linguistic and general skills, consisting of the ability to listen and to understand speech (aural comprehension) or read and understand written language (visual comprehension).

Perfect understanding is the beginning of comprehension, and comprehension is the beginning of learning language. Comprehension requires the retaining of information from a whole sequence of sounds or read material.

Verbal comprehension relies upon the function of words, affixes and inflections. At the age of 30 to 36 months both verbal and non verbal comprehension ability develops among the children. The child understands the sentence structure, makes semantic difference in verbal comprehension. And understanding the action in a picture is a non verbal type of comprehension. Comprehension is a response to language learning. It is an increase in information. It opens up the pupil's response. It is a testing device to measure general intelligence. It is a skill or ability which can be developed among the learners gradually. It differs from person to person and depends on age, previous learning experience, cognitive style, aptitude, motivation and intelligence.

In verbal comprehension elements like sense, feeling, tone and intention are to be understood by the learner. Sense - words and images excite some thought about the items presented.
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**Feeling**

That is feeling about these items. We have an attitude towards these items that is, emotions, emotional attitude, will, desire, pleasure, unpleasure etc. These are the connotative aspects of life, some personal flavours or colouring of feeling, leading to understanding the feeling of the passage. We can ourselves undergo the same feeling or we can think of it, for example, in drama by seeing the performance of character we undergo the feeling of the whole action conveyed by the character.

**Tone**

We understand the speaker's attitude towards the listener. But a writer chooses or arranges his words differently. We understand his attitude by grasping the tone.

**Intention**

Apart from what he says (sense), his attitude to what he is talking about (feeling) and his attitude to his listener (tone), there is a speaker's intention, his aim. He speaks for some purpose and his purpose modifies his speech. The understanding of it is a whole part of the whole business.

Thus in verbal comprehension grasping, seizing the sense, feeling, tone and intention of the written texts, show the ability in comprehension. Comprehension means the ability to recognise the main idea, to express it in one's own words, to note details, relate them to the main idea. They may explain and illustrate or describe the main idea.
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It is not restricted to the language comprehension. It may be of painting, music, sculpture etc. It is the ability to summarize and organize the ideal from the given poem, showing interrelationship between the items of description. It means the ability to follow the sequence of ideas, to follow a set of directions, and to predict and anticipate outcomes.

Thus in verbal comprehension reading becomes a thinking process. The learning begins at the time at which the student comprehends the content.

The verbal comprehension consists in understanding or construing the sense, feeling, tone and intention of the speaker or the writer. The word -images which excite some thought about the items presented, is understanding of a sense.

In non verbal comprehension the construing, understanding of painting, sculpture or music takes place. There also one comprehends sense, feeling tone and intention of the painter or musician.

Simple intention can be easily understood, complex intention requires careful study. Thus comprehension means understanding the sense, feeling, tone and intention of the writer or artist, or speaker. It may precede decoding and almost a part of decoding process. Meanings occur in the mind of a reader before words are decoded even to a new reader or a beginner. Thus comprehension must be immediate and must run concurrently.

There are two ways in which levels of comprehension
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have been analyzed.

i) Literal meaning,

ii) Recognition of literal meaning,

iii) Inference, and

iv) Evaluation.

There is a difference between "Concurrent meaning" and 'staged meaning'.

Nature of reading comprehension -

(i) Cognitive recall - The writer is saying this ... or ...

... that ...

The reader selects certain meanings as being representative and rejects others as being unimportant.

(ii) Convergent response - Can relate items and means that is, selected meanings are recognized.

(iii) Divergent response - From this and that it seems ...

These meanings lead me to believe that...

(iv) Imaginative response - This has set me dreaming about...

Mental operations which could be termed as inference and evaluation are utilised at every level of response. Thus an essential element, interaction between the intentions of the reader and the meanings which are available in the text. It shows the competence of the reader in utilising the text in order to extract meanings appropriate for his intentions. Thus reading comprehension rests on the ability and willingness of the reader.
The comprehension is the most important stage in language learning process. It is a psychological and neurophysiological process that takes place in the mind of a listener, reader or observer, which gives him complete understanding, satisfaction of the external object, of the piece of literature, music, painting etc.

**Psychological, Physiological Analysis Of Comprehension Process**

According to neurophysiology the central nervous system consists billions of neurons. They are interconnected. The receptor cells receive the sensory information. The neuron must be sufficiently stimulated. The nervous system may be divided into central and peripheral sub systems. The brain and the spinal cord make the central nervous system. The peripheral system consists of the nerve fibers that connect all the parts of body – with the central nervous system. The fibers of the peripheral system may be either sensory or motor. Sensory fibers transmit impulses initiated by external stimuli to the central nervous system. Here the reception and perception activity takes place. (Thirumalai M.S. 1977)

The central nervous system sorts out the information brought by peripheral nerves, interprets the information and initiates appropriate action. Here the process of understanding and then comprehension activity takes place. The central nervous system can also initiate its own action.

Thus in brief, we find out that there is a
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correlation between physical, cognitive and linguistic maturations. The language is also a developmental process.

The reception, perception, understanding and comprehension develops further activity of thinking. Thinking is an unobservable behaviour. There is no need of immediate stimuli for one to indulge in thinking. It can be a self generated process. The central nervous system (brain) accommodates this activity. Thinking refers to having a conscious mind, to remember experiences, to call something to one's conscious mind, to invent or conceive something, to analyze or evolve rationally. Thinking is and is not dependent on language. It is a logical process. For example, men knowing different languages play chess without communications with each other.

Concept is the important area closely interrelated to thinking. Concept is the internal representation of classes or categories of experience an organism undergoes. These experiences can be direct responses to the aspect of the external environment or responses to other experiences. As experience can be infinite and diverse the concept can also be the diverse and classified in infinite ways.

Thus the work of thought is to progress from the sense-apprehended task through the structuring of meaning to the unfolding of thought itself. Language and thought are directly linked. Thought can function only on the basis of some language or the other.

Psychic activity is characterized by sensitivity. It is a feeling which forms the basis of all psychic activities
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including human consciousness. Thus sensitivity must be considered the foundation of all psychic processes, including thought and consciousness, as the highest stage of psychic development. Feeling for recognition is the psychological recognition of thought. It is clear that every thought must be felt by a person. Thought is a sort of mental pointing to one kind of object or another. We may think by means of images, words or by less describable means, but means are not important, the result is important.

From this point of view 'thought' like 'consciousness' itself is not completely different from feeling but may be said to represent what are in fact feelings except that they have become consciously realised. Thus conscious thought is preceded by feeling and thought expressed in words represents the recognition to this feeling.

In comprehension process the psychological, physiological and linguistic aspects are interrelated to one another. Comprehension is the perfect understanding which is a mental activity. It gives a person satisfaction after comprehending a verbal or non verbal object.

Special attention towards comprehension in English was paid long back in 1920. Still it is regarded as the most important testing device in examinations. Apart from being a testing device comprehension develops the grasping ability in a person.