CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this study was to identify the features of functional literacy in L<sub>2</sub> among the socially and economically disadvantaged within a functional literacy framework in a multilingual context. The study began with the belief that the disadvantaged learners have the ability to use L<sub>2</sub> in spite of a poor literate family background in L<sub>2</sub>. This conviction was examined through the eight written tasks given to them as classroom work during the regular, timetable of the academic term in this teacher-researcher's institution. It was found that the disadvantaged learners had ideas, world-knowledge, background knowledge, could describe their experiences in a limited range of lexical and grammatical knowledge. This limited range of lexical and grammatical knowledge helped in communication through functional literacy. This aspect of the disadvantaged learner's functional literacy is supported by theoretical studies in the concept of functional literacy Verhoeven (1994), Cairns (1977), R. C. Solomon in Castell et al (1986), social theories propounded by Berger and Luckmann, Basil Bernstein and Halliday in the 1960s, literacy theorists like Misson (1998), Morgan (1977), Barton (1994), Street (2001, 2004), bilingual theories (Cummins, 1986), SLA theories, Patten et al (1990), Cook (1991, 1999) Pienemann (1998), Mitchell and Myles (1998), Lightbown and Spada (1999), Street (1997). (see Chapter II).
5.1 Discussions of the findings of the study

The research studies cited in the above section indicate the possibility of structural properties of language influencing L2 literacy, the “developmental processing capacities” (Pienemann, 1998) of the learners, “inter-language” (Selinker, 1972) features which may be grammatical and idiosyncratic. Therefore, the focus of the study was on examining the role played by factors such as the need for L2 literacy in a multilingual context, the communication possibilities while the language is in developmental stages and the “inter-language” features which show the learner’s L2 writing to be ungrammatical and sometimes idiosyncratic. We began the study with a detailed examination of the learner’s composition scripts during the regular L2 hour. This was done with the help of information from the data. From the data it emerged that the learner has a present need to write. Recognising that the learners’ needs to write are immediate, the teacher has a role to play in providing a conducive atmosphere for language learning in the classroom.

The data also revealed that disadvantaged learners in private, government funded tertiary level institutions were strongly motivated to write in L2. This was indicated by the fact that the students recognised the importance of acquiring L2 writing skills. Further, it was found that since their teachers encourage them to learn English, most students are motivated and have a healthy attitude towards the learning of English. Therefore, even in the classroom many students preferred to
use English with their teachers and classmates. They also understood the importance of correct spelling, structural aspects of L2 writing and recognised the importance of exposure to English outside the classroom, viz. library visits, L2 newspaper reading, L2 interaction with teachers, conversation with classmates and anyone else with whom they could converse in L2 slowly. The teachers were also found to be aware of the L2 needs of their students, for they too supported their L2 learning efforts, the L2 functional literacy features and emphasised the need to consciously maintain the L2 production outside the college as discussed in the earlier chapter. (see Chapter IV, section 4.3)

The assumption that the socially and economically disadvantaged learner is motivated to write in L2, was based on theoretical support derived from studies in L2 functional literacy. (see Chapter II). These theoretical concerns examine the role of (i) literacy as a skill (ii) literacy as power (iii) literacy as different in different contexts. These studies indicate that literacy as a skill is a first step in L2 writing (Castell et al, 1986). Studies also see literacy as power (Misson et al 1998) which helps them achieve success and literacy as self-directed activity and discovery by active involvement (Morgan, 1977). These studies also showed that L2 functional literacy is relative to the contexts in which it is used. (Barton 1994). These studies helped in strengthening the notion of “common underlying proficiency” (Cummins, 1986) and “interdependence of ‘need’” (Street, 2001). Therefore, it was assumed that an examination of the classroom composition
scripts (see Chapter IV, sections 4.13 and 4.14) would throw light on the identification of L₂ functional literacy features available among the socially and economically disadvantaged learners.

This decision to closely observe and examine the written scripts in L₂ composition in the classroom, was followed by the development of a suitable system of analysis for looking at the features of functional literacy in L₂. The scripts were then analysed on the basis of Bell’s (1993) framework of the four “commonplaces” of literacy – “User”, “Text”, “Society” and “Process” and Atkinson’s (1987) terminology of “The English Used”, “What the student wished to express” and “Strategy”. In Chapter III all the terms have been discussed as part of the research tool for the study (see Chapter III, section 3.15). In Chapter IV, the four terms of Bell (1993) have been made into framework which was combined with the three terms of Atkinson (1987) to analyse and interpret the data. The four ‘commonplaces’ of Bell (1993) help to find the common ground in arguments from a variety of academic backgrounds. Atkinson’s use of activities in which learners “find a way of expressing their meaning within the limits of their competence in the target language” (1987:245) is analysed by the writer with 3 categories, viz., student wished to express, English used, strategy. Atkinson (1987) has used the first category “student wished to express” to give examples from Spanish and translate each bit of the data into L₂, English. In our study, Atkinson’s category has been modified to the disadvantaged learner’s existing use
of L₂. "English used" is the category which shows the exact data from the sample (see Chapter IV, section 4.12). "Strategy" is used with reference to the processes that the student employs to achieve functional literacy in L₂.

With Bell’s (1993) and Atkinson’s (1987) framework as support, this study interprets the data to recognise the disadvantaged learner’s L₂ literacy within a functional literacy framework. These learners have the advantage of an intermediate level of L₁ literacy. Yet their L₂ literacy is different from L₁ literacy. (see Chapter III, sections 3.4.1.2 and 3.4.1.3). L₂ literacy is more to satisfy a need for communication. It is the “basic interpersonal communication skill” (Swain and Cummins, 1986) that the socially and economically disadvantaged learner requires as an unmediated need. The written language or functional literacy in L₂ seems to approximate to the making of meanings in a context (Halliday, 1995), giving information (Gee, 1989) and the written language is “socially shared” and “socially organized”. (Hymes, 1970). L₂ functional literacy is supported by L₁ many (Pattanayak, 1981; Atkinson, 1987). L₂ functional literacy is a way of identifying the way a language penetrates deeper levels of social stratification and diversity of speech. (Bakhtin, 1986). L₂ functional literacy as communication in a multi lingual context is to know to do something with words (Roy Harris in Nigel, 1990) it also shows the confidence and the willingness to learn among the socially and economically disadvantaged (Bruner, 1977). Also, using L₂ in writing in a multi lingual context is a linguistic human right based on the principles of non-
discrimination and freedom of expression (Paulston, 1977; Varennes, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988; Phillipson, 1992). These theoretical concerns are discussed in Chapter I and II. It may be appropriate to give a description of L2 functional literacy of the disadvantaged learner by attempting to describe the L2 in Tasks 1 and 2.

The general tendency was to translate from L2 to L1 keeping to the order of expression of ideas as was written in L2. The bilingual disadvantaged learner’s L2 is an expression of coherent, thoughtful idea structure, which he tries to put down through the available language. Therefore, the vocabulary is simple, the communication is direct and straight. There are no shades of meaning. Only sometimes there are interesting expressions like ‘vacation gap’, ‘written’, ‘enjoyfull’, etc. which mean vacation time/leisure time, return, full of enjoyment. Apparently, the bilingual learner’s schema accommodates the word ‘gap’ for ‘time’ and not for something missing. Pronunciation patterned words are carefully spelt as in the case of “written” for return. And, “enjoyfull” like beautiful or wonderful. (see Chapter III, section 3.3)

In the second task it may be observed that “a functionally literate student learns to situate mechanical skills in a pedagogical context, one that is consistent with a need driven approach to literacy according to which users invariably focus on what is important to them (Kay in Selber, 2004). In other words, teachers of
writing and communication “attend to categories of meaning that students bring to the classroom. They create curricular spaces in which the interests of students are considered to be a legitimate focus of academic study (Aronowitz and Giroux in Selber, 2004:76). An aspect of functional literacy could be to bring significance to learners’ interests of the world thus enabling them to write. The learners’ interests may be considered as a context in the “commonplaces” of literacy as discussed by Bell (1993). Of the four “commonplaces” of literacy, Text, User, Context and Process, Bell says that “context” is the relation of the part to the whole. Any piece of text sits within a larger context spatially, temporally and conceptually and cannot be meaningfully considered without recognition of that context. The reader or writer recognize the context in which the text is implicitly placed, and also brings his or her own context to bear on the text to interact with it according to prior knowledge and expectations that are both socially and individually determined”. (Bell, 1993: 138)

In the learners’ writing samples, the larger context helps the reader understand the writer. The learner writing on a topic of current interest can be a legitimate focus of study. It may not be part of the prescribed syllabus. However, paragraph writing is prescribed for academic study. A topic from current affairs can lend itself to curricular space.
In the fifth and sixth tasks, the learner writes a paragraph in L₁ and then translates it into L₂ and L₂ to L₁. Atkinson (1987) says that such strategies help the learners in making informed guesses for correct translations of lexical items. This activity helps in sustaining learner's motivation. Sometimes, the gaps in the learner's thought process get revealed because L₁ literacy reveals his thoughts better like a spontaneous utterance and a flow of ideas. But L₂, because it may not follow the conventions of writing still remains a "spontaneous utterance", (Bakhtin, 1986) inaccurate from the point of view of grammar. "Absolute correctness is achieved only beyond natural language in mathematics. Our daily speech continually fluctuates between the ideals of mathematical and of imaginative harmony". (Vygotsky, 1962). The background knowledge helps the learner to utter/write spontaneously though grammaticality is still in the process of development.

An overview of all the tasks urges us to see FL in L₂ vis-a-vis Sharwood Smith's (1994) point of view that "investigators may have to create a special definition of 'spontaneous writing' for the purposes of investigation, perhaps introducing some degree of control by, say, encouraging the writer to write quickly, or to write long texts without regard for errors, or otherwise satisfy themselves that the writer is not focusing on form but only on the content of the written message. Finally what matters is functional literacy. According to R.C. Solomon which means "the skills that everyone in this society must learn if they
are to have any possible chance at decent jobs and fair treatment and protection. Its practical importance is unquestionable and therefore, usually unquestioned” (Castell et al. 1986: 41).

5.1.1 Findings in terms of the research question

The research question was to find out how one can use a functional literacy framework to describe the L₂ literacy of the disadvantaged learner. The feasibility of using a functional literacy framework seems possible because the framework would attempt to focus on the communication potential of the L₂ that the disadvantaged learner has. Functional literacy, as already discussed in Chapters II and IV enables the learner to use L₂ for writing purposes. Functional literacy supports the learners’ “willingness to communicate” (Dornyei, 2003) and his readiness to write in L₂. These two aspects are vital for learners who don’t have a L₂ rich environment. The framework of functional literacy is feasible because it makes the disadvantaged learner a writer before he can become a speaker of L₂. It may be worthwhile considering that several speakers of L₂ may not be writers. The disadvantaged learners cope with several deterring factors in the environment and writes L₂. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the L₂ writing abilities of the disadvantaged learner as enabling communication in a multi lingual context where L₂ may not be required for speaking purposes. Edelsky says that “written language is language” (1996: 90). She cites Halliday (1985) who says that written language makes meanings in a context. She cites Hymes (1970) who
says that written and oral language is socially shared and organised in a context. It may be said that the disadvantaged learner’s written language is, therefore, a shared language for simple communication needs which may be required and understood by many L₂ users.

5.2 Implications of the study

The attempts to recognise the disadvantaged learner’s L₂ literacy features within a functional literacy framework have three broad implications.

5.2.1 Pedagogical implications

Teaching the disadvantaged learner needs an individual understanding of each learner in the classroom. The teacher may have to spend some time interacting with each one of them. It is also necessary to understand the corpus of language that every learner may have. This involves setting up a few, simple writing activities which would give the teacher an idea about the topics/areas in which the learner needs a lot of instructional support in terms of teaching-learning, techniques, strategies and writing time in L₂ with increasing chances of improving the L₂ corpus he has. For all the above points to be realised, valuable interaction time has to be focused on using L₂ in speech related to L₂ writing activities for the present and future needs. Teachers need to constantly revise their teaching strategies for better learning outcomes from the learners. Teachers need to have a large measure of patience, concern and understanding of the learner’s situation and
help him cope with academic challenges. The teacher’s personality or personal attitudes play an important role. Therefore, the teaching of disadvantaged learners can be aspect for further studies in teacher education.

5.2.2 Identification of tasks to help functional literacy

In light of the need for a teacher to constantly improve teaching techniques and strategies, the identification of tasks and materials which help in promoting functional literacy is a major responsibility. While it may be true that many learners have functional literacy there would still be a large number who would need activities and tasks and materials which would get them to write in L2 so that they move towards functional literacy.

To recognise the functional literacy of the learners, it would be useful and productive if the learners are asked to write on topics that they are able to see and feel and things that they know about because they do not have a reading environment. Topics should be familiar and simple such that they motivate the learner to write immediately. For example, tasks that learners can relate to easily or topics of topical interest such as rains, examinations, physical exercise, drinking water scarcity, drainage problems, travel by bus or train. The objective is to make a greater number of learners to write.

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5.2.3. Assessment

Looking at the written samples of the disadvantaged learners in order to recognise the L₂ functional literacy features, the question arises about the compatibility of norm-oriented evaluation. The issue can be discussed in terms of whether there should be a norm-oriented evaluation at all for the learners. Evaluation needs to help the learners in a supportive, encouraging manner which strengthens his motivation to learn. Assessment needs to accommodate the positive aspects of learners’ language in some form words of appreciation from the teacher may help. A separate kind of examination may be considered. Assessment or evaluation needs to follow a different pattern such as recognising a learner’s ability to use a word correctly though he may not spell it correctly.

L₂ functional literacy may be thought of as language in a large, broad sense where reading and writing are present not as skills but as primary situations in language use: that is, even without too much speaking and listening. L₂ functional literacy in a literate society would mean a facilitative quality in language production especially while reading and writing whenever a situation demands these abilities.

Functional literacy in L₂ is the evidence of a need to produce language in hitherto formal situations, which become essential situations in a bi-lingual context. The learner’s readiness to use the language is the formal operation of his
thought process where thought does not wait for a structural framework and coherence but thought surges to produce itself in lexis known to the learner. L₂ writing and speaking in a multi-lingual context are one and the same. This is contrary to an established convention that writing is an advanced skill in language which comes after the reading skill.

In a monolingual world, where the strength of the language system is the measuring rod for the norms of written language, the bilingual’s capacity to use L₂ according to the society L₁ written norm will make him an additive bilingual. However, in a multilingual context where the learner has limited chances of L₂ acquisition through formal education and minimal opportunities of speaking, the ability to write in L₂ can be construed as functional literacy. This functional literacy may be deviant from the norms of any written language, more so, L₂. But, the fact that L₂ is used for writing with little speaking and less reading are circumstances which need to be understood. It may be argued that the formal education system has not failed the learners but that the learner requires a different set of assessment norms. Contrarily, as long as the language strengths of the learners’ L₂ are not taken into account, the education system continues to fail the learner and, in effect, a great segment of population across the bilingual reality in the world.
5.3 Significance of the study

The significance of the study may be considered with reference to three concerns emerging out of the recognition of disadvantaged learner’s L2 functional literacy.

In terms of the disadvantaged learner, the learner’s problems such as the home background, the academic environment, the lack of reading facilities as discussed in Chapters I, II and III are highlighted to foster understanding and concern towards a section of learners who are motivated, persevering and willing to learn. Therefore, the disadvantaged learner needs to be understood with the help of his learning attributes rather than the lack of inaccuracy in usage and written conventions. For the bilingual learner, the mother tongue is an invaluable resource and therefore, L2 can be learnt with the help of L1 over a longer period of time.

The learner’s L2 literacy is not recognised according to existing patterns of evaluation. The need for an alternative kind of assessment is a known, often felt issue that needs to be grappled with seriously and attempts to recognise L2 literacy require renewal of effort over shorter periods of time. The disadvantaged learner’s multi-lingual context leaves the learner with a choice of using his L1 if the L2 doesn’t seem to work. The multi-lingual context’s dominant role of different languages serving the purposes of communication also points to the need for an
alternative assessment system which would increase the learner’s confidence in using L₂.

5.4 Limitations of the study

The study was limited to a choice of 8 tasks in paragraph writing. In terms of the research question, the study attempted to examine the concept of functional literacy and the L₂ literacy of the learner. It also attempted to show the importance of recognising the L₂ literacy which had recurrent features in the learners’ samples. Since the focus was on examining the concept of functional literacy and providing a framework of functional literacy to describe the L₂ literacy of the learner, the study was limited to a close observation of 8 tasks in paragraph writing.

This study could be used to find out whether the learner is aware of the strategy he has used for writing. The study could be considered for use of any specific teaching or learning strategy which could reveal several dimensions of the disadvantaged learner’s L₂ functional literacy.

The study has been limited to one particular educational set-up in Andhra Pradesh. The findings of the present study could perhaps be more generalizable, if it is extended to a few more educational institutions in different regions in India.
The number of samples was also restricted due to the limitations such as time and facilities of a study on a smaller scale, such as the present one.

5.5 Suggestions for further research

Generalizability of findings can be enhanced if a similar study is carried out on a comparative basis between various educational institutions in Andhra Pradesh itself. The tasks could be increased or modified for more insights into L₂ functional literacy.

The materials that could be used for identifying the L₂ functional literacy are also an interesting area for minor research projects.

Since our data has indicated that the teacher’s role is that of a facilitator, it might be interesting to record teacher-talk in such classrooms. This might establish the qualitative differences in teacher-talk in the L₂ classes where a big number of disadvantaged learners are present.

A comparative study with advantaged learners may be considered for similarities in usage which may influence the consideration for an alternative assessment pattern.
The teaching learning conditions in the other tertiary level institutions in India, such as the privately managed institutions, which do not obtain funds from the government, are likely to be different from that of the aided or government funded institutions. It might be useful therefore to study these colleges also, or compare them with the aided institutions.