Chapter I

1.0 Introduction

This study attempts to look critically at a specific concept/model of literacy embodied in mainstream language curriculum with reference to English within reform policies of recent decades. This framework will enable us to understand some of the problems in the English classroom; how the importance of education is being argued through a range of reform agendas; what the existing reading curriculum expects of its clients in the shelter of language classrooms. In short, how do the processes of reform frame the literate? Here, ‘reform’ is being used as a lens for a range of social events. Therefore, reforms refer primarily not only to policy documents of government, but it also includes, the structures and mechanisms of the 'lived experience' of schooling itself. It is here that identities are hard to conceal. The claims of the reform rhetoric will be scrutinized critically to analyze some of their discrepancies. A large measure of the critique will invoke an alternative concept of literacy which is absent in these policy documents here. Very perfunctorily, it will also attempt to look at the intervention of critical pedagogy and its implications for the possible.

I have chosen, very broadly, the post-secondary and the General English classroom at the undergraduate level in India as a context against which some of these inquiries will be studied. However, the study initially started by
looking at regular battering the 'vernacular' students were subject to, not only by the attitude of dominantly schooled teachers but also their peer groups from English medium backgrounds. In fact, the more 'blue blooded' teachers in the English Departments where many of them refused to teach these courses when the HS (Higher Secondary) was made part of the college in the 10+2+2 set up in 1976. These attitudes have worked their way more subtly into the very dictates of routine practices today. And here, it is worth the mention that St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling, a part of the Loyola and Xavier chain of Jesuit institutions, enjoys the unique status of a minority private college but all the while being one of the most prestigious elite institution in the hills. Contradictions often severed into cloaked discriminations have hardened considerably over the years as the march of privatization and globalization overtakes education for all or education at all.

In order to unpack the cloaked discriminations, the reading classroom will serve as a lens to critique the contradictions within the teaching learning praxis. Working within the Freirian praxis of 'reading the word in the world', the relevance of critical literacy will be invoked. How several perspectives have enriched the field and helped us to understand the literate, will be considered in relation to real world events shaping language praxis.

Even if the 'literate' is generally evoked/sought in the humdrum of the classroom, the English classroom can no longer be considered a neutral
space. Classrooms have become more complex and contested today. It is here that the literate is cast. It is here that students, teachers, interact and critically read a jostle of texts curricular, administrative, political, cultural, as they push and pull the borders of ‘doing’ language.

1.1 The Problem

Most undergraduate teaching in Darjeeling’s college, St Joseph’s College (which might reflect many undergraduate colleges in the country), seem to be caught up with addressing the problems of the (1) difficulty an English teacher encounters while teaching a class with ‘limited’ language proficiency; (2) the completion of syllabus in a limited time; (3) a time bound learning schedule on the part of the learner; (4) the teaching of academic conventions of reading and writing; (5) the teaching of a ‘standard’ variety of language; (6) getting students to shed their non-standard use of the language; and (6) arriving at a standardized testing model which would effectively discriminate between so called ‘good’ and ‘bad’ students.

Most of these problems seem to preoccupy the teaching and the college administration so much that questions and issues which give rise to such problems remain unaddressed. For instance, the teaching of the standard language and getting students to use only the standard language seem to be a reigning problem. But we have not questioned the source of this problem. Does the problem lie with the students or the standardization of the
language itself? What constitutes this standard language? Who gets privileged because of this? Who gets marginalized? Then, is it the ability of the learner which is to be considered or the standardization process and the politics of standardization which determines the schooling system?

Connected to this issue of standardization is the concern with school failure. It seems to be a simple equation:

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\text{nonstandard language} = \text{college failure} \\
\text{school failure} = \text{lack of intelligence}
\]

This equation is lived and reiterated to such an extent that it has reached a level of dementia. The equation seems to satisfy the teachers conventional explanation for student failure/casualty but impacts the student identity and their ability to learn and succeed in life.

The problems once identified and are explained by teachers and administration in very conventional terms. Some of the explanations are: the students are unintelligent, which is primarily explained on the basis of genetic and socio-cultural factors gleaned from college records to trace the origin. St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling is a minority Christian college and admits students who belong mostly to minority communities such as tribals, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It therefore becomes an easy way out to explain school failure on the basis of cultural and genetic factors. The second reason is a more technical one: that the syllabus specified by the
University has not been covered by the teachers. Therefore, the blame is shifted to poor teaching. The learners and teachers are to be blamed, but not the curriculum and the examination pattern, which is a given, not to be questioned and criticized.

It is argued in this study that we need to shift our attention from these surface level problems and their explanations to larger discourses which formulate them and take into the account the complexity of the situation created by these discourses. What then are these discourses? Where do we look for them?

Let us first identify the issues we need to address in English language curriculum. They are – the role of language and its discursive power; the notion of communicative competence which is a shared token of the standard language and gets associated with literacy; and the concept of literacy which is reflected in the institutional expectation of reading and writing and how all these impact on the identity of the literate.

These three issues directly address the language classroom but also have wider implications both on the curriculum and the stakeholders in the curriculum. The presence and absence of language (in this case ‘standard language reflected in student reading and writing) defines knowledge and education. Therefore, the curriculum which is considered to aim at the
'dissemination of knowledge' gets defined and delimited. This notion of curriculum is ridden with problems. A closer and in depth analysis of the English curriculum is defined at the local level (here, colleges like St Joseph’s College, Darjeeling) can help us disclose the 'hidden agenda' of the curriculum in the country and examine how it gets translated into actual practice.

In looking at the English curriculum in the country and at local levels, this study will try to draw attention to some of the critical positions and issues confronting English Education in India today.

- The construal of what is knowledge and the conceptualization of language within this frame
- Curriculum on the run and the question of silence central to it auguring disruption.
- The precarious predicament of the 'educated' subject within the discourse of silence
- Language that cannot only be treated in a disembodied way, as a mere tool or instrument of communication but as a mode of dialogue and participation in community
- The traditional notion of text as any printed matter has given way to considering a written text as a 'social situation'.
1.2 Organizing Concepts

Before we discuss how the study will embark on the critique of the English curriculum at the national and the local levels, it would be useful to clarify certain working concepts used in the study to indicate some of the positions held to understand the educational discourse:

Voice: Very broadly, in the study I have used the concept 'Voice' as an organizing concept to understand: the notion of dialogue, participation and communication; the metalanguage for learning, at a more contextual/specific level; and reading as narrative space. Voice, in this study will be used as the dialogic mode of performativity in general, and, 'communicative competence' in particular. The 'culture of silence' and the 'culture of etiquettes' promoted by the present prescribed language curriculum obscures the dimension of participation and diversity, and hence, pluralism and voice as practised in the classroom. Voice is being used as a metaphor to capture alternative dialogue possible in the classroom.

Text: Texts have a special salience in education. Education's socio-cultural site and its numerous social practices become available most commonly in one major encounter that is texts. The transactions within the reading curriculum unfold not only what language is but in decoding the texts, readers also emerge as who they are. Hence, a literate in the absence of text is a rare occasion and without the power of language is unheard of.
What we do to texts and with texts has generally changed the meanings we associate with the classroom, and more importantly, the literate. So intertextuality\(^2\) is a very grounded principle throughout – it inhabits the very nature of texts, the way they come to us in the classroom as well as everyday situations.

**Discourse:** Foucault (1978:49) speaks of discourses as not groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but rather “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. “Discursive formation” he sees as existing whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, “…a system of dispersions (wherein) between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations).”

The discursive construction of a reader/learner as the object of which the reform policies speaks and upon which it pronounces takes place therefore along lines of predictable and legitimated practices which s/he is ill equipped to resist\(^3\)

### 1.3 How the Study Unfolds

By its very nature, education is not value neutral, nor does it exist in a historical/political vacuum. My research methodology will be subject to this
theoretical premise. Drawing upon the 'language of critique' from the new sociology of education, critical pedagogy takes position that any pedagogy for that matter is implicated in a relation of power and domination and is implemented to create and sustain social inequalities. Very prominently, Paulo Freire (1973) notifies how the 'domination' of 'the banking theory' in education produces a 'culture of silence'. Critical pedagogy offers a way of conceptualizing the critical question of power in the classroom and education at both local and systemic level and offers a philosophical justification for a politically committed pedagogy. Within educational sites, as policies, curriculum, textbooks and schools interact – the discourse on the literate becomes more apparent. In analyzing these social texts such as policy, curriculum, and schools – will serve as a powerful lens to understand the formation of this literate.

The study will reread some historical documents – Macaulay's Minute (1835) which established English education in India; the Radhakrishnan Commission (1949) which looks at the general improvement of University education in newly independent India; the Kothari Commission (1964-66) which reiterated the recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Commission in a more changed context; Syllabus Reform in English (1976-77) which attempted to refreshen the teaching of English at the Undergraduate level with an eye to relevance and change; Curriculum Development Centre (1989) that reported in great detail the need to meet the problems of learner
heterogeneity. A local document which directly influences the teaching at
the undergraduate level in Darjeeling – Higher Secondary English
Syllabus in West Bengal (1976) – will be examined to see whether the
policy statements at the national level have been incorporated in state
specific educational documents.

An attempt will be made to explore the consequences and describe the
processes which are a result of these high-powered national documents.
Have these policies impacted the formal English classroom at the ground
level? In order to look at the classroom processes, the study focuses on the
reading-writing classroom. A close analysis of the English classroom will
attempt to find answers to the following questions:

• how learners respond to the prescribed texts (both in written and oral
  forms)?
• what role language plays in their effort to understand and interpret
  these texts?
• how they participate and dialogue in situations that are intimate or
  implicate their identity?

Along with a closer look at formal English classrooms, the study would also
analyse an adult literacy situation in Darjeeling. This has been done with the
intention to highlight differences between the formal and informal
educational programmes in terms of – standard language, notion of literacy,
and the relation of literacy to dialogue, empowerment and practising democracy.

By looking at policy documents, curriculum documents and the classroom reality in formal and informal contexts, I examine the discourses that provide our ideas about the literate in the first section of the theses, (Chapters 2&3). The selection and discussion of these texts historicize the literate. In the third and final chapters, I draw upon my own experiences of an English teacher both at the graduate and undergraduate level, as well as adult education spaces. I locate particular events to address the issue of how current pedagogical practices of the English classroom help or impede the development of a critical literate.

1.4 The Perspective taken for Document Critique

Locating the present critique within the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, I will be drawing upon the methodological tools of the new sociology of education that observe how dominant narratives of textbooks contain in them the biases of a particular section of society. These biases are classified into categories such as male / urban/ middle class by examining the presence or absence of certain characters or characteristics.'(Kumar 1989:1617). Occasionally, they move beyond the parameters that define the textbook and analyze how the transaction of the text in the classroom perpetuate existing inequalities.
Texts are being used in both empirical and literal sense. It will mean looking at unstructured text data such as a conversation, a college regulation, the ordering of the college day are all to be taken as examples of text positions. The classroom event will form the mainstay focusing on the educational scenario. Throughout the study ‘dialogue’ will be my key image for theorizing practice in education. Firstly, dialogue presupposes the primary mode of educational engagement. Secondly, discussion and debate, both of which I take to be varieties of the dialogue, prefigure the meaning of participation within democracy. Lensing through a couple of policy documents as it impacts the classroom I will try and understand the concept of ‘English’ and thereby, literacy in force.

Taylor (2000; 1877-79) has pointed several uses of textual analysis. Such analysis reveals (a) the values underlying particular policies by teasing out certain discourses, (b) contradictions within policy documents, (c) how policy text transforms, incorporates, and neutralizes other (e.g., feminist, dalit, post colonial discourses, and (d) the historical context of policies, how particular issues are placed on the policy agenda and how popular prejudices are used and articulated in policies.

1.5 Overview: Outline of Chapters

The chief aim of this study is to critically examine the anomalies and ambiguities embedded in language education that are designed to nurture equal education for all.
In trying to pursue the question of what it is to be literate unweaves the precarious predicament of the educated subject in the supposedly shared culture of the 'standard language'. To gain a more comprehensive insight, sociological approaches and critical literacy arguments will be used to scrutinize the career of the reader literate housed in a contradictory and uneven society.

What defines the literate subject? Mediating this substance requires problematizing reading-writing praxis in the context of change. Historically, a wide range of writings/conceptualizations on the 'subject' are discussed. Current theory rereads the terrain to argue that the destinations of authoring such texts (the literate) author the margins. The various reform projects invoked in Education offer a comprehensive view of the play of authoring and authored texts as a primary 'schooled' commitment. In scrutinizing the interface between education, society, history and culture does offer an opportunity to examine the existing notion of equality, and therefore, conceptualization of difference. As language and the language learning curriculum are mutually sustainable, the need to understand the function of language in schooling is important. The study also hopes to understand how many of the tools, categories, perspectives and ideologies of education provide unquestioned support for these socio-political frameworks. How support for existing and often problematic institutional structures is marshalled in education.
The present purpose of reading the making of the literate not only in the word but also in the world demands examining the relationship between education, society and identity. Subsequently, in this context, it is important to understand how we propose to deal with texts and what we mean by them. This means recognizing that we are already housed in a network of texts, empirical and literal. Texts, here, are to be considered at the level of meaning rather than their forms of textualization borrowing Patrick Shannon's (1998) formulation where texts act as symbolic codes, conventions in our daily lives that encode and communicate social relationships. Postmodernism holds a notion of the text which is to a large measure mediated by heterogeneous multiplicity of materials the text assimilates and the processes by which it transforms them. Therefore, the project of being literate cannot be understood by remaining within one discipline only. The classroom provides a unique instance of a confluence of heterogeneous texts not only in the discursive resources of what students bring into class but also as they stand in immediate relationship with institutional expectations. In this instance, intertextuality is a very helpful concept for looking at the margins, for it simply is a de facto recognition that we live in a world constituted by multiple kinds of discourses that both interfere and obliterate each other as well as complete and complement each other. However, this is looking beyond the restrictions imposed on the definition imposed on intertextuality in both structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of it.
But more importantly, this study will attempt to highlight that all discourses embeds in it the history of its purpose. To cite an example, the analyses of the historical dynamics of literary canon formation in both *The Masks of Conquest* (Gauri Viswanathan:1990) and *The Lie of the Land* (Rajeswari Sundar Rajan:1991)explore the concept of culture capital and more specifically linguistic capital in English Studies in India. The field of my research scrutinizes the nature and subject of educational reforms.

The problem arises if the discursive power of language is ignored in language teaching setups. It is necessary to look and understand the Freirien notion of language in education, which is quite different from the Chomskian and Vygotskyan understanding of language. This means that language cannot be theorized without considering the historicity of these sittings and without recognizing of ideological insertions embedded in language.

The study will briefly map the terrain of the various dispositions of 'being literate' as viewed within the English Language curriculum. In problematizing language it will be necessary to see how the 'literate' has been represented within several texts – the teaching of English (General) at the undergraduate level, English as a subject at the postsecondary stage, non-formal literacy texts and the concept of 'reform' within the Syllabus Reform in English movement (1976-77).
Chapter I. This chapter has introduced the problem located for investigation and deal with some of the chief issues relating to the field of language education. Three organizing concepts of voice, texts and discourse will be taken up in the way they can help to illuminate the problem of language education for discussion. In problematizing language praxis as culture, it will be necessary to see how the literate has been represented within several texts – the teaching of English (General) at the undergraduate level as well as in non-formal set-ups of learning.

Chapter II Various dispositions of 'being literate' as viewed within the English language curriculum will be mapped very briefly in this chapter. Broadly speaking, several perspectives and approaches have been identified as informing the discourse – ideas that have enriched the field of the English language curriculum. Some of the more pertinent issues of Colonial, Post-Independent and Contemporary Education will be lensed through major debates and reforms. Salience of a few relevant concepts to pedagogical praxis will be dealt with in greater detail.

Chapter III. In this chapter there will be an attempt at siting and reading historical texts. The focus of this chapter will primarily be on scrutinizing the reform agendas of two major documents, The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49) and the Kothari Commission (1964-66) for purposes of illuminating the more general agenda of technologization of language or the making of
English, and the second, the language policy as it impacts the formation of the modern literate.

Chapter IV. Studying the concept of change in the two language reform projects as it impacts language praxis will be the focus of this chapter. The main purpose of both the Syllabus Reform in English 1976 and the West Bengal Higher Secondary (HS) Syllabus (English)(1996-99) will be to look at the view of language taken.

Chapter V. The reading Curriculum will problematize praxis and therefore, what it means to be in reading curricular – specifically in a General English classroom where notions of authority or authoring of texts on the ground are transacted. And inadvertently getting around the question of whose curriculum is it anyway? The question of what education is all about hinges on the question of whose curriculum. Looking at some of the texts produced (both in formal and non-formal setups) will be as gestures of rereading/rewriting and reinventing the classroom.

Chapter VI. Concluding Observations

Epilogue: Desiderata
Notes

1 Texts, here, are to be considered at the level of meaning rather than their forms of textualization. Texts act as symbolic codes, conventions in our daily lives that encode and communicate social relationships. Patrick Shannon (Curriculum Inquiry, V.28, N.2, 1998)

2 This refers to a post modern terminology ‘conference of texts’, a ‘network of textual referrals to other texts which is always already carried outside itself. It is to a large measure mediated by heterogeneous multiplicity of materials the text assimilates and the processes by which it transforms them. It is simply a de facto recognition that we live in a world constituted by multiple kinds of discourses that both interfere with and obliterate each other as well as complete and complement each other. (The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary & Cultural Criticism: Joseph Childers & Gary Hontzi (eds.). Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1995).

3 In our societies as in many others the property of the discourse - in the sense of the right to speak, ability to understand, licit and immediate access to the corpus of already formulated statements, and the capacity to invest this discourse in decisions, institutions, or practices – is in fact confined (sometimes with addition of legal sanctions) to a particular group of individuals.