CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education is a major concern for any nation. Any deliberation on education has to take care of two aspects: one is giving education to all and the other is defining quality parameters in education. Post colonial India at various points of time has made several efforts for both universalizing education and ensuring quality parameters. The project, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and its several initiatives are to be viewed from this perspective. In order to gain better understanding about the initiatives of SSA for bringing about quality changes in the domain of language learning it is necessary to place, and examine, the project in a historical context.

1.1 SSA – The Historical Perspective

The history of SSA can be traced back to the World Conference on Education for All (EFA), an international initiative first launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 to bring the benefits of education to “every citizen in every society”. In order to realize this aim, a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, and development agencies committed to achieving specific education goals. The conference led to an international consensus on a few non-negotiable principles of education. These are:

- Recalling that education is a fundamental right for all people, women and men, of all ages, throughout our world;
Understanding that education can help ensure a safer, healthier, more prosperous and environmentally sound world, while simultaneously contributing to social, economic, and cultural progress, tolerance, and international cooperation;

Knowing that education is an indispensable key to, though not a sufficient condition for, personal and social improvement;

Recognizing that traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development;

Acknowledging that, overall, the current provision of education is seriously deficient and that it must be made more relevant and qualitatively improved, and made universally available;

Recognizing that sound basic education is fundamental to the strengthening of higher levels of education and of scientific and technological literacy and capacity and thus to self-reliant development

Recognizing the necessity to give to present and coming generations an expanded vision of, and a renewed commitment to, basic education to address the scale and complexity of the challenge”

The overall goal was to improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure the excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills is one among the goals.
In the context of World Declaration on Education for All India took steps to revamp primary education. A major initiative was the reformulation of The National Policy on Education (NPE) in the year 1992. This policy document emphasized the need for a substantial improvement in quality of education to achieve essential levels of learning. The Programme of Action, 1992, stressed the need to lay down Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL) at Primary and Upper Primary stage. This need emerged from the basic concern that irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex, all children must be given access to education of comparable standards. The MLL strategy for improving the quality of elementary education was seen as an attempt to combine quality with equity.

Main steps for operationalisation of MLLs as laid down in the Programme of action 1992 were:

- Primary assessment of the existing levels of learning achievement;
- Modification of the MLLs to suit local situation if needed;
- Initial and recurrent orientation of teachers to competency based teaching;
- Preparation of Teacher Training handbooks for MLL based teaching;
- Introduction of continuous and comprehensive evaluation of students and using evaluation results for remedial action;
- Preparation of unit test and other evaluation materials and putting them in an item pool for using as and when required;
- Using MLL norms as and when textbooks are revised; and
• Provision of competency based teaching learning materials to make the educational process activity based and joyful.

Quality issues in elementary education therefore revolved around the quality of infrastructure and support services, opportunity time, teacher characteristics and teacher motivation, pre-service and in-service education of teachers, curriculum and teaching-learning materials, classroom processes, pupil evaluation, monitoring and supervision etc. Indeed improvement of quality in these parameters and its sustenance was a matter of grave concern for the whole system of education. Some issues that were identified are mentioned below:

1. Providing for reasonably good school building and equipment to all schools and centres for alternative schooling;

2. Providing quality Early Childhood Care and Education to all children until 6 years of age;

3. Ensuring a minimum of 4 to 5 hours per day of meaningful stay of each child in school;

4. Providing trained and committed teachers in all schools and really interested and oriented instructors for all non-formal education centres

5. Improving the quality of existing pre-service teacher education;

6. Organizing quality in-service teacher education to all teachers on a periodical basis and with a follow up mechanism;

7. Creating and sustaining teacher motivation;
8. Revitalizing supervision system for quality elementary education;

9. Re-organization of curriculum to imbibe local needs and incorporating the concerns of the NCF 2000;

10. Development of competency based and contextual teaching-learning material;

11. Improving teaching-learning processes to make them child centred, activity based, mastery learning oriented;

12. Providing for remedial teaching and enrichment programmes at due occasions in all classrooms;

13. Introduction of formative evaluation and grading system to make it stress free for children;

14. Reduction of curriculum load; and

15. Introducing participatory management of elementary education with community support.

1.1.1 The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)

A major initiative to address these issues and thereby translate the policy document on education was the launching of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) during 1995-99. The objectives of the DPEP were:

1. To increase coverage of primary education (increase enrolment and retention, especially in remote areas),

2. To increase equity (reduce differences in enrolment by gender and social
strata to less than 5 percent),

3. To improve education quality (increase learning achievement by 25 percent over measured baseline levels), and

4. Increase efficiency (reduce waste of financial resources, reduce primary education completion time, reduce dropout rates to less than 10 percent)

Positive results of the program included improving access, quality, retention, learning achievement, and system efficiency. The initial pilot phase of the program started in seven states (covering 11 percent of all primary students). In Kerala, DPEP was launched in 6 districts out of the 14 districts in the State. At the National level the program was successfully scaled up to reach about 55 percent of India’s primary school population. Enrolment in the districts that were included in the program had increased at a faster rate than in non program districts. Enrolment increased 5.5–6 percent in districts that participated in the program. The enrolment of girls increased faster than the enrolment of boys. Learning achievement, measured by standard language and mathematics tests, improved significantly in the districts that participated in the program. There was a focus on student learning along with decentralization and local empowerment. Continuous learning and education were emphasized.

The DPEP continued till the year 2000 and the project has glided over to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). This project was launched in all the 14 districts of Kerala in the year 2000.
1.1.2 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is an effort to universalize elementary education by community-ownership of the school system. It is a response to the demand for quality basic education all over the country. The SSA programme is also an attempt to provide an opportunity for improving human capabilities to all children, through provision of community-owned quality education in a mission mode.

It is a programme with a clear time frame for universal elementary education and an opportunity for promoting social justice through basic education.

1.2 Objectives of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

- All children in school, Education Guarantee Centre, Alternate School, 'Back-to-School' camp by 2003;

- All children complete five years of primary schooling by 2007

- All children complete eight years of elementary schooling by 2010

- Focus on elementary education of satisfactory quality with emphasis on education for life

- Bridge all gender and social category gaps at primary stage by 2007 and at elementary education level by 2010

- Universal retention by 2010

The objectives are expressed nationally though it is expected that various
districts and States are likely to achieve universalisation in their own respective contexts and in their own time frame. 2010 is the outer limit for such achievements. The emphasis is on mainstreaming out-of-school children through diverse strategies, as far as possible, and on providing eight years of schooling for all children in 6-14 age groups. The thrust is on bridging of gender and social gaps and a total retention of all children in schools. Within this framework it is expected that the education system will be made relevant so that children and parents find the schooling system useful and absorbing, according to their natural and social environment.

1.3 Approach of SSA for Quality Enhancement

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan will make efforts to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the issue of quality. Efforts to decentralize the whole process of curriculum development down (grass root level) to the district level will be made. Reducing the load of non-comprehension by facilitating child-centred and activity-based learning will be attempted. Learning by doing, learning by observation, work experience, art, music, sports and value education shall be made fully integral to the learning process. Appropriate changes will be made in the evaluation system to make it more continuous and less threatening. Performance of children will be constantly monitored in consultation with parents but shall not be restricted only to cognitive areas. Teachers’ role in preparation of textbooks and secondary learning materials will be enhanced. School timings will be made contextual.
Norms approved under the scheme of Restructuring of Teacher Education will apply. Block/Urban Resource Centres and CRCs will be set up as per the norms mentioned earlier. They will function under the guidance of DIETs.

Efforts to identify teachers as resource persons will be attempted through adoption of objective criteria. Teachers as resource persons could then interact with pedagogy experts and other teacher educators to develop useful learning approaches for children. Efforts to recognize the unique learning needs of children must be made. The diversity of learning environments and learning approaches should be encouraged and teachers should have the freedom to experiment on a much larger scale.

1.4 Curriculum and Textbook Development

The NCF 2005, developed by NCERT after extensive consultations, endeavours to reduce the curriculum load and make learning more enjoyable for children. NCERT has prepared a three-phased programme for the development of textbooks from 2006-07 till 2008-09. The NCERT textbooks have attempted to incorporate the concerns articulated in the NCF regarding sensitivity for cultural diversity, gender and a child centred constructivist approach to learning. NCERT is supporting States to review their syllabi in the light of NCF, 2005. Based on this Kerala has developed Kerala Curriculum Framework. (KCF 2007)

1.5 Need and Significance of the Study

The major interventions of SSA to improve quality of education include curriculum renewal, Teacher Training, free text books, teacher grant etc. At the
lower primary level (1-IV) the main focus is on language proficiency and numeracy.

Children in lower primary classes should be able to express their thoughts and ideas freely and meaningfully in any life situation they encounter. Identifying letters and words, reading aloud a given passage, answering specific questions in the learning materials are not the lone indicators of qualitative language learning. The learners have to construct ideas, select their own mode of expression and develop their own style in expression. They should have autonomy in the use of language.

National curriculum frame work (NCF-2005) has given a lot of importance to language learning as it is crucial to not only meaningful learning in all the subject areas but also to the learner’s emotional, cognitive and social development. Educationalists have noticed that new entrants with poor language background remain poor performers in all areas unless specially helped in language skills. Language education has been acknowledged to have the greater potential as a means to develop, progressively through various stages, attitudes and values related to all the core components in National Curriculum Frame work by incorporating themes and adopting suitable teaching strategies. NCF is erected on the foundations of Social Constructivism and critical pedagogy. The document spells out its assumptions about language acquisition for formulating the approach of language learning and developing programme for language development.

The main assumptions about language learning are:

- Language is innate to all human beings.
• Language acquisition is the unfolding of this innate system.

• Language is not the totality of listening, speaking, reading and writing but the inner competences required for the performance of the four skills.

• Language is acquired not through imitation but through insightful construction.

• Language acquisition is not a liner growth but is that of spiral growth.

• Acquisition progress from whole to part.

• Acquisition becomes smooth when linguistic experience is real, holistic, relevant, need based and meaningful to the child.

In the context of NCF 2005 Kerala has developed its own curriculum framework namely, KCF 2007 and has launched new textbooks in primary classes. The revised curriculum triggered much debate across the State mainly because of the change in belief systems it demanded. Instead of loading the child with lots and lots of information, the curriculum focused on helping her construct knowledge. The whole context of language learning was problematised necessitating a shift from the earlier teaching-learning paradigm. There emerged a lot of scepticism among some quarters of the society and some people even argued that the change in the language classroom would negatively affect the quality of language learning. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has been the agency to conceive and launch programmes for translating the curriculum document into classroom practices. Accordingly, SSA, Kerala has been undertaking a variety of continuous teacher empowerment programmes spending a large amount of money.
In this context it is relevant to investigate the impact of the Constructivist Language Pedagogy as envisaged in the curriculum and the related teacher empowerment programmes implemented by SSA on the pedagogic competence of teachers and the language proficiency of learners.

It is hoped that the study will provide research based data for formulating qualitative programme for improving proficiency of children in mother tongue in Kerala. It is with this context that the investigator wishes to carry out the research programme. It is hoped that SSA will be benefited out the study for planning its future teacher empowerment programmes in language pedagogy.