ABSTRACT

The skill of reading is one of the corner stones of language proficiency in any language and the skill of reading in English acquires a special significance in a country like India, where the students need to read textbooks and reference books in English to a much larger extent than to write and speak in the language. The present study proposes to examine and survey the teaching of reading to ESL undergraduate students in order to understand and assess its nature, extent and quality.

Chapter one of this study aims to briefly outline the teaching of reading in the past four centuries and then moves on to record recent theory and research in reading pedagogy. Reading has been a topic of discussion for at least the past four hundred and fifty years and different methods in the teaching of reading have been adopted for children, for example the phonic method, the word method and the sentence method. Recent research and theory in reading attempt to explain how a reader is able to derive meaning from written language and frequently extend their findings to the teaching of reading in the classroom. Most of the theories of reading can be categorized into either of the three major groups: bottom – up, top – down and interactive views of reading. A bottom – up view of reading describes it as a uni-directional flow of information beginning with the visual input on the written page and proceeding through a series of progressively higher order processing stages.
until meaning is derived. Thus, the focus is on the recognition and the identification of graphic symbols. This is the view supported by Bloomfield (1942), Fries (1963) and others.

The top-down paradigm of reading emphasizes the role of higher cognitive processes that generate meaning based on contextual information, the background knowledge and reading strategies that the reader brings to the reading task. This view chiefly derives from schema theory (Anderson and Pearson, 1988; Carrell, 1987 and others). Schemata are abstract knowledge structures or mental configurations stored in memory. They are referred to as “building blocks of cognition” and “the fundamental elements upon which all information processing depends” (Rumelhart, 1980). Schema theory in psychology has stressed the role of background knowledge in language comprehension which consist of an interaction between the resources of the reader and the characteristics of the text. Schemata have been classified into two broad types, namely content schemata and formal schemata. While content schemata are related to the content or topic of the text, formal schemata are related to the formal and rhetorical organizational structures of different types of text. The top-down view of reading is supported and advocated by Goodman (1967), Smith (1971), Neisser (1967) and others.

The interactive view of reading tries to integrate both the above mentioned views and proposes that reader draws upon both
the graphic and contextual information in abstracting meaning from written language. This view of reading attempts to explain the process of reading within an information processing analysis of language comprehension. The top-down view of reading appears to be the most popular one at present which provides a strong rationale for pre-reading activities as well as comprehension strategy training in the classroom. In the last section of chapter one, views from the classroom by different teaching practitioners have been recorded.

Chapter two reports recent trends in reading pedagogy which in other words means how the teaching of reading is carried out within a CLT paradigm. This chapter is divided in three sections: theoretical bases, course design and materials and exercises. The first section deals with the theory of language, the theory of language learning and the theory of reading which form the basis of the teaching of reading in CLT. The second section deals with course design and outlines the trends in curriculum design at present. There seem to be three major approaches to curriculum design at present: structural-analytic, functional-analytic and non-analytic/experiential. These terms are proposed by Allen (1983) and by analytic, he means that types of syllabus which break language data in discrete elements. So while the structural and functional syllabus present language input to the learner in form of separate elements, broken down in the experiential natural growth
approach to communicative language teaching. The data is not broken down analytically by the course designers or the teaching but is presented as a whole chunk in the expectation that the students will discover the rules of language without formal instruction as children do, when they are learning their mother tongue. While the structural syllabus was employed as the main basis of teaching by the audio-lingual method, the functional analytic syllabus and the experiential syllabus are adopted by CLT. But Allen remarks that all these three types of syllabuses should be integrated and incorporated into the language teaching curriculum to different degrees according to the requirements of the teaching context and student needs.

The third section of chapter two deals with materials and activity types and begins with the useful model of activity presented by Littlewood (1981). This model divides activities into two broad categories: pre-communicative and communicative. While pre-communicative activities include structural and quasi-communicative exercises. Communicative activities include functional communicative activities and social interaction activities. The important thing about Littlewood’s model is that he finds a place for structural practice within a CLT paradigm. In the remaining part of this section the researcher presents the examples of different types of activities used in CLT for the teaching of
reading which aim to develop the various skills of skimming, scanning, predicting, inferencing, critical reading and so on.

Chapter three which is the main part of the thesis records the observation of the teaching of reading in thirty classes of the undergraduate level in AMU. In these thirty classes ten teachers were observed and three continuous classes of each teacher were taken up for study. The focus of study was to see how much the teaching of reading at the undergraduate level in AMU conforms to CLT principles. The instrument employed to observe these classes was an observation schedule based on Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) by Frohlich, Spada and Allen (1985: 53-6). It also derives ideas from the schedule proposed by Moskowitz (1971: 213). The researcher sat at the back of the class for observation with agreement with the teacher and observed the teaching of observed reading according to the above mentioned schedule. The data gathered in this way is obviously qualitative and interpretive. Each teacher’s teaching was observed under different headings divided into three broad sections: The first section was Classroom Teaching which included objectives, materials, pre-teaching and main-teaching. The second section Interaction Analysis, focussed on the extent and type of classroom interaction. The third section, dealt with Pedagogic Principles underlying the classroom practices.
Chapter four, the concluding chapter, discusses the findings of the observation of classroom teaching as reported in chapter three. It aims to examine the teaching of reading in AMU at the undergraduate level with specific reference to CLT practices and principles. The different aspects of classroom teaching are taken up in this chapter in the same sequence as presented in the observation schedule. First of all, Classroom Teaching was taken up, consisting of objectives, materials, pre-teaching and main-teaching. Interaction Analysis and Pedagogic Principles were taken up next.

As far as the objectives of teaching are concerned, it was found that the different skills of reading guessing, predicting, previewing were the focus of study in the observed classrooms. Materials consisted of interesting and relevant passages or exercise types and sometimes also authentic texts. Classroom interaction mostly forms the core of main-teaching but deplorably pre-teaching activities were missing from most of the classes. The teaching of strategies seem to be the basis of most classroom activities which conforms to CLT principles and practices. Classroom atmosphere was mostly congenial. Teachers seem to act as counsellors, resource persons and facilitators of activities. However, mostly they were intolerant towards errors which goes against CLT principles. Over all, it can be said that the teaching in AMU at the undergraduate level is fairly influenced by CLT principles. Though
certain traditional practices from the past seem to be lingering, such as intolerance towards errors and loud reading in the classroom. It must be noted finally, that the teachers’ approach in all the observed classes comes across as an eclectic one which incorporates many of the elements of communicative language teaching but also adopts some practices of the earlier grammar–translation method and the audio-lingual method.

In the 1970s and 80s communicative language teaching created a lot of enthusiasm and was considered as a panacea for all pedagogical ills. However, by the end of 1980s the flaws and shortcomings of this method became obvious and teaching theorists and practitioners realized that no single method can provide the answer to all language teaching problems. So, the best approach is that which adopts techniques and practices from different sources according to the requirements of given teaching context.