CHAPTER 2
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2.1 Survey: The Approach

This dissertation attempts to address the methodology of teaching English (Group B) at the H. S. level in West Bengal. Collecting relevant data from the actual field for it was felt imperative in order to find out an actual picture of it. There is however no officially published data available. The present investigator therefore sought as primary source responses of both teachers and their students with a set of questionnaires accordingly prepared. Their responses would constitute a substantial and reliable body of data and information to be used in this study. This exercise is likely to provide some substantial evidence to the hypothetical premise of this work postulated at its outset. The schools covered by the survey are all Government-aided, and their medium of instruction is the vernacular, Bengali.

There is an acute dearth of bottom-up study either on the part of any individual or on behalf of the Council. The Council’s own feed-back, though used to some extent here, has its own limitations. It does not have much theoretical underpinning. Secondly, its approach is by nature top-down. Its interaction remains restricted mainly to the official level including school authorities, and sometimes the practising teachers. The feedback from individual learners is conspicuous by its absence. But, in the modern and post-modern pedagogical theory the main focus has shifted from the teacher to learners (Larsen-Freeman 2000: 18; Hedge 2000).

2.2 Methodology Used in the Survey

To begin with, the survey mode has to focus on convenience for the sake of capturing the real picture prevailing at the grassroots. To cover the state educational context for this study, three types of areas can provide some more or less representative samples of the H. S. ELT situations in the state. These are ‘urban’, ‘urban-rural’ and ‘rural.’ This categorization is made in an effort to capture the distribution of the diverse socio-economic conditions in the state, which must have their impact on ELT. By ‘urban’ it is meant to have some metropolitan atmosphere in education and where English education is looked upon mainly as
a 'generic' skill in the sense Graddol (2006: 72) used it. The other two 'areas' are relatively further away from the metropolitan centre. However, socio-economic condition is more stressed here than the geographical distance. These three areas also need to be well distributed between the northern and southern parts of West Bengal. Kolkata and Durgapur in the southern part, and Siliguri and Malda in the northern part are incorporated in the urban category. This distribution is made for numerical balance between the two regions, north and south. North Bengal comprises six districts whereas South Bengal consists of thirteen districts.

In South Bengal district towns like Tamluk, Barddhaman (Burdwan) are taken into the category of urban-rural area. The rest is considered to fall under the rural category. Those two rural schools were from Purulia and Nadia districts. In North Bengal Siliguri and Malda are considered in the urban group. Balurghat and Coochbehar are for the semi-urban group there. The rural areas fall under Jalpaiguri and South Dinajpur districts.

To carry out such a survey the 'non-probability sampling method' (NPSM) is found to be more useful than other modes like 'census', 'probability' sampling or 'random' sampling. The first one is not economically and physically viable for an individual effort. The NPSM depends for its sample collection on the judgement and convenience of the investigator. It is however larger than the other mode of 'probability sample' (Paul and Donald 1986), and, of course, narrower than the 'census'. In that case, alongside some general observations, I can focus on some individual factors too, whose variance, otherwise, in terms of characteristics, is measured not to be so wide. In spite of it all, it would turn into a type study like the 'Convenient Sampling', stated in Chapter VII (Paul and Donald 1986). The sample size used here is small, because the present case is going to be a type study. Here, we have tried to find out some general structures of teaching-learning situations or contexts in the H.S. classroom.

It is true that the NPSM is likely to be more biased than 'random sampling', if it is not conducted with utmost care, caution and neutrality. According to Paul and Donald (1986: 208), the expertise of the researchers in such cases can only redeem the possibility
of shortcomings. In the present case the knowledge and experience of this researcher — he has the experience of teaching at the H.S. level in two colleges in two different districts of West Bengal — may come to some help.

The theoretical approach to the survey is adopted from Paul and Donald (1986) while the basic structure of the questionnaire (the students' version) is based largely on Wilga Rivers's (1983) model. Some alterations have been made to suit the prevalent situation in West Bengal. Rivers's model is for the immigrant students in the U.S, like other ESL studies in Europe. The learners in those L2 situations are highly motivated by the immediate impetus and challenge from exposure to the native variety (Harmer 1996: 1). They are usually very keen to acquire English very quickly for the purpose of acculturation and integration to the mainstream cultures. Actually, this model of integration can be modified as being a move from the instrumental to the integrative, which means that the learners initially start with the instrumental approach, mostly in their non-native background at home. When they migrate to the L1 or native English set-up, their needs change and they adopt an integrative approach. Further, learners get proper classroom exposure (the teachers are native speakers) as well as exposure from the society. But in West Bengal, the learners are exposed to the non-native variety. So, the structure suggested for a survey in the ESL teaching in the native English background is adopted mutatis mutandis for the sake of a framework in a new field. The two broad targets of 'integrative' and 'instrumental' (Gardner and Lambert 1972, in Hedge 2002: 23) in a particular teaching context are to be assessed separately for their different styles of implementation. In the L2 teaching context in India in particular it is broadly instrumental, as rightly set forth in the H.S. syllabus. It can hardly be integrative in a non-native teaching context like ours.

In selecting individual schools we have followed the 'Convenient Sampling Method' like the Ad Hoc approach. In that exercise we had applied our sense of judgement and representation through our experiences and knowledge. This attempt is made in order to find some ground-level props from colleagues and from the learners. The survey was continued till the planned area was covered. Within this small set of samples a considerable
number of converging points are observed, which prove satisfactory for the size. Otherwise, with any further enhancement of survey the data would tend to be repetitive by nature.

In the Indian situation, the motivation is rather uni-directional in general; the target is simply instrumental, as stated earlier. And the students are attached to their own native set-up. Here, the motivation is cultural. Exposure is very limited. I proceeded to frame the questionnaires with an experience-based hypothesis about the commonest area of learner difficulty in our H. S. English teaching situation. Meaning-centred aspects like vocabulary is supposed to be a major problem area for the students. Vocabulary comes in first in our teaching context. That is why it has come up as a first item in my questionnaire for learners. The point of inquiry from the view-point of the learner needs which include vocabulary, forms the basic of my hypothesis behind the preparation of the students in the course. It emerges from my classroom experiences that whenever some text-pieces were read before the class, the first question that the students make for inquiry is the meaning of some word or other. It is the meanings of words that the learners do mostly stumble upon. Hence, such an important linguistic item assumes a key position (Item no. 4h) in both the questionnaires. The survey results, which will be analysed later, too reflect this tendency. It is first of all the learners’ general and basic demand in their approach to learning the meaning in a new language. And, of course, in that sphere the lexis comes topmost among the linguistic units.

2.3 Scheme of the Survey

The whole structure of the survey is based on an approach of ‘Convenient Sampling’. The total number of schools brought under the survey is fixed at twelve, and the total number of student respondents was set at thirty for every school. Hence, the total number of students covered in the State had risen up to three hundred and sixty. In our actual classroom meetings the number of students present often exceeded the target range. The target-group learners, the H.S. students of the major three streams of arts, science and commerce, were presented with a copy of the questionnaire no. 1 each in the classroom
itself. In such cases, to respond to their interests positively all of them were included in the interview. In that case, to make the selection bias-free, just the first thirty response sheets in the order of their collection from the classroom were picked up. Among the total number of schools (twelve), there were three schools each for boys and girls, one each in all three types of areas (i.e. urban, rural and semi-urban). This arrangement is for the proper representation of gender factors in the survey. The other six schools covered are co-educational. All the twelve schools are however distributed well over the length and breadth of the state. Further, the selection of classes is made across all the three major streams of Humanities, Science and Commerce, although it was not possible to maintain a pro rata distribution there. It is, of course, obvious that it is the humanities section that forms the majority. Most of the students in the H.S. course do enrol themselves in it. Moreover, it has an additional advantage for the surveyor as well as for the school authorities to assemble the required number of students on any day for the purpose. And the survey makes itself restricted to students at the end of Class XI course.

Equally, too, the number of English teachers approached for their interview could not actually be restricted to the average two per school, as in many schools there are more than two teachers in the subject. But, as it is the norm to have two language group teachers each for the Secondary and the H.S. sections in a school, two teachers are available in most of the schools surveyed. In order to get a related and contrastive picture of the academic set-up, in all cases the teachers who were sounded both with the questionnaire and some unstructured interview, belong to the same schools as the learner respondents do. All the teachers of English were given the response sheets for recording their views. At the time of analysis only the first two of them per school were taken into account. The other sheets were just checked for comparative ideas, if any. In the case of North and South Bengal the number of teachers is twelve each.

In comparison with the huge number of students in the H.S. course every year, the number of students interviewed, to be called the Sample size, is small indeed, because it is basically a type study. We wanted to capture a representative part of the situation through it
in order that a sound analysis about the actual teaching mode can be made.

2.4 Hypothesis and The Questionnaire

In the Indian situation, the motivation is rather uni-directional in general; the target is simply instrumental, as stated above. And the students are attached to their own native set-up. They are not facing any serious challenge from any new language. Here, the motivation is, better to say, cultural, and instrumental. Exposure is severely handicapped. Of course, I proceed to frame the questionnaires with an experience-based hypothesis about the commonest area of learner difficulty in our H. S. English teaching situation. It is mainly the meaning-centred aspects like vocabulary being the foremost one among others, such as meaning, themes, grammar, etc. Vocabulary comes in first in our teaching context. That is why it has come up as a first item in my questionnaire for learners. The point of inquiry from the view-point of the learner needs which include vocabulary, forms the basic of my hypothesis behind the preparation of the students in the course. It emerges from my classroom experiences that whenever some text-pieces were read before the class, the first question that the students did make for inquiry, is: what is the meaning of this or that word or sometimes of a sentence or two? It is, however, the meanings of words that the learners do mostly stumble upon. Hence, such an important linguistic item assumes a key position (Item no. 4h) in both the questionnaires. The survey results too reflect this tendency to be shown later. To a good extent they support my primary conviction. It is first of all the learners' general and basic demand in their approach to learning the meaning in a new language. And, of course, in that sphere the lexis comes topmost among the linguistic units. There are several other reasons to support the stand.

2.5 Subjects to be Interviewed

After the decisions are taken on the selection of the actual field, i.e. the schools to be surveyed, and the methodology of the survey, the next set of decisions concern the choice of some objective criteria for the selection of subjects or informants for their faithful and frank responses.
2.6 Apparatus and Other Materials Used

For the field survey, two separate sets of questionnaire, one each for the students and the practicing teachers in the field, are prepared. There are also some other items like learners’ needs for English (Munby 1972; Wallace 1992a, in Carter and Nunan 2001: 25), their opportunities to read English outside the classroom (‘external motivation’) and several other things like culture and language. The questionnaire for the learners incorporates two textual questions of multiple-choice type from the textbook pieces. One is from an essay of Robert Lynd, and the other one is a poem by Tennyson, both from the previous syllabus. It is because the survey was undertaken in the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 sessions. The questions are mainly on reading comprehension skills from known texts. This is targeted to plumb the actual performances of students in the course besides their general responses. This would be of some use in correlating these with their earlier responses to some general questions. The theme of the poem is quite easy and simple to follow.

In prose Lynd’s ‘Forgetting’ is modern though, the theme is very common, and its presentation is also systematic. The questions set are for testing the reading comprehension, one of the two major ‘literacy’ skills along with writing which are distinctly stated amongst the ‘objectives’ in the syllabus. Questions on both the text pieces are of comprehension type with both local and/or global types. The purpose is to test the learners’ complete mastery or grab of the subject-matter or theme of those text-pieces. The other options are of general type concerning their academic aspects, such as their difficulty and ease about certain areas of their syllabus like the short story, essays, poems or the play, and the reasons behind them. The question no. 4h in the questionnaire leads them to make a hierarchy of difficulty in learning some aspects of their subject, such as vocabulary, grammar, meanings, etc. in general, as in an overall follow-up of the earlier specific areas, such as queries no. 4f and 4g.

The other set of questionnaire (Appendix II) made for the survey purpose, is meant for teachers, and it too shares some common aspects with the students’ set. They have sought responses to some of those common features from teachers’ perspectives (the difficulty hierarchy of the same learning points, queries no. ’s 8 to 14). This is done again to confirm learner responses from the other side of the table, that is, from their own classroom teach-
ers. Their converging tendency, if any, would help a teacher to reach a sound, feasible stage of teaching-learning strategy at the classroom level. It also looks for the teachers’ opinion about the syllabus, the utility of their professional qualifications in their job, etc. This is how the questionnaire meant for the teachers seeks to focus on both the theoretical and the practical aspects of their classroom activities.

The responses to the questionnaires both from teachers and their students are then separately organized into some distinct categories, and are posted onto two separate sets of counting sheets for their categorization. The other two sets of counting sheets are used for their summary presentation for a scrutiny by some statisticians like Prof. Partha Lahiri, University of Maryland, U.S. and Dr Pranab Nag of Nabadwip Vidyasagar College. That was rather a kind of a working sheet in addition to general tabulation sheets prepared for general perusal (Appendix IV), and apart from their results being reported here they are not brought in in detail.

Again, separate diagrams may be framed for greater insights from major perspectives like learner needs, their socio-economic status, exposures to TL, regional and gender discrepancies, etc. in their permutations and combinations. A set of binary ‘histograms’ can be prepared on the basis of survey records; a sociogram too is possible. Other types of tables can be drawn to facilitate clear reflections of them.

For the purpose of the survey, two consecutive periods of thirty-five minutes each were requisitioned from regular routine hours of the schools to meet learners and their English teachers with afore-said questionnaires. The school authorities were very forthcoming and liberal in offering me the necessary permissions for the purpose. Even in some cases I formally contacted school authorities over telephone, and they in return made their prompt reply in the positive. On the spot the Head Masters/Principals took additional pains along with the subject teachers to arrange for the meet. Even in the case of poor presence falling below the required number, they took special efforts to fix another day for a good gathering. Usually, the Head Masters/Principals along with their English teachers accosted me to the classrooms, and made an introduction to the class. As I presented the case before students, they showed a great enthusiasm, quite usual in our regular classroom. Maybe, it came to
them as a relief from their daily hackneyed routine job. Another mark of their enthusiasm was evident from their overwhelming presence in the classroom on that occasion. Not only that, they also had shown a great interest and cooperation in the business. They extended their helping hand to distribute the sheets of questionnaire among their friends. They did a similar yeoman service to me at the time of collecting those completed sheets. Most of the classes are quite larger exceeding well over sixty.

2.7 Questionnaire for Teachers

The other set of questionnaire meant for the teachers have had two aspects of query for their views and suggestions about the merits and demerits of the prevalent assessment systems. Evaluations of our learners’ preferences remain least affected (i.e. untouched) in the thick of syllabus reforms. They remain as hackneyed as ever. Though, only some minor alterations are allowed in the question patterns. The teachers show again their keen interests in the examination systems, yet their responses are ambiguous. Though, mostly they are unhappy with the existing evaluation system, they too exhibit a strong sense of confidence in it.

Before going into the analysis in the next chapter, it is to be noted that the whole body of data collected and processed is presented in a table form at the end. It will be referred to at times in course of analysis and discussion in the text. And it is posted here for any future use in academic fields, researches, or pedagogical contexts. To the best of my knowledge this is the maiden venture for such a field study in the actual teaching-learning contexts of the H.S. course West Bengal. The feedback that the Council sought and received so far is in the form of official communication, and quite restricted in approach. The teacher responses are selective, and so have some inherent limitations. And their processing is not done in a full-fledged manner as this present work attempts to do. Further, they are quite restricted in its use by the Council only as a catalyst for the relevant change that surfaces in the form of a syllabus. But this study tries to cover almost every aspect of the H.S. pedagogical situations. The project attempts to make a contact with all human resources, teachers, students and the Council officials concerned with the English teaching programme at the H.S. level. It has
also taken into account the teaching materials, testing and evaluations to some extent, and its overall teaching methodology. So, it has tried to be an extensive work, on it all in a small space. That way this work may be a pioneering work in the ELT context at the intermediate level in West Bengal.

2.8 Other Data

Other authentic sources for relevant data and information as to the H.S. results and other statistical data include some of the back numbers of the Council periodicals, ‘Samsad Parichiti’ (Introduction to the Council) from 1992 onwards available with the Council. Some other subsidiary sources have come in the form of data supplied by the Council officials, i.e. the Secretary, the Deputy Secretaries, and others, solely for this research purpose. Two sets of the H.S. English syllabuses (Group B), the old as well as the revised (Appendices) are extensively used all through this work for comparison and study. One copy of the current H.S. English syllabus (Group B), effective from the 2005-2006 session, has been supplied to the present investigator by the Deputy Secretary, W.B.H.S. Council. The H.S. final examination question papers, both I and II, for a number of years, have also come to some use in this study. Finally, two copies of Higher Secondary English Selections, one for poems and plays and another for prose, as well as several other previous Selections, are collected and amply used in the study.

Some initial interactions with the students in their classes, had led the investigator to bring in some alterations to some of the items of the original format. For instance, in cases of choices in relation to the mainly academic issues, such as reading newspapers (Questionnaire I, item no. 4e.), purposes of studying English (ibid. item no. 4e.), etc. Most of all, in offering their options for some items of difficulty and ease, the respondents sometimes feel either jittery or punctilious to offer priorities against them. From these interactions it was suggested that they could numerically prioritize their options if they be several. Likewise, the present investigator had to provide for some space and scopes for that purpose, and accordingly got the questionnaire revised and printed. This practice helps to bring out some real learner responses, and has made the questionnaire much more realistic. Their likes and
dislikes for particular literary genres selected in their course, chiefly through those preferences, offer one a fair insight into their general likes and dislikes, and the reasons behind them. In general, their inquiry there about their multiple choices, shows their serious involvement with and sincerest thinking about their study matters or materials. The actual analysis of those choices would be taken up in the chapter on data analysis (Chapter 3).

Notes

1. The term ‘post-modern’ is used here, as it is found used in ELT literature in general, not in the literary-philosophical sense.