CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

I.1 INTRODUCTION

English, with the innumerable changes that it undergoes is so unique that it is in a state of flux forever. But the language is always a live wire in hot demand as a window to the world of science and technology and as a vehicle of cross currents in culture. Hence its status among the elitists and the educated is one of esteem and eminence. Inspite of the increasing importance accorded to the regional languages in India, English continues to preserve unity in diversity in the Indian subcontinent. Globalization has only added flavour to the urge in people, especially the youth of today, to learn the language.

I.2 PLACE OF ENGLISH IN THE WORLD TODAY

Any language is a system that mediates between the world of sounds and the world of experience.
The language an individual learns as a part of the process of growing up is the mothertongue, which goes to fulfill the social aspirations of the people. But, in the interest of a country’s national integration, especially for a multilingual country like ours, it is essential to have a common language. English is the best ever known for this since its utilitarian values are innumerable, which can be shown as follows:

- Higher Studies
- Promotion of Science and Technology
- Interstate Communication
- Literacy Endowment
- International Understanding
- National Integration
- Vehicle of Cultural Transmission
- Library Language

English plays a vital role in promoting harmony not only in the international arena, but also as an interstate language in our country, where there is diversity in languages which are more than 22 spoken by the Indians in different
states. Naturally this language happens to be a vehicle of cultural transmission too, thus promoting national integration as well. As we all know, English enjoys the greatest esteem as the only library language which is endowed with a rich fund of knowledge brought out through books, especially in the fields of science and technology. Thus it promotes higher studies. English, which is the ‘Window to the World’ and serves as the visa for visiting the realms of knowledge, has been recognised to be the link language at the international level too. English literature, with its great epics, poetry and dramas by renowned litterateurs, is the richest and the best, much cherished by one and all.

Unfortunately, inspite of all its values, English has come down in its status in India as the importance given to regional languages now is more. English now enjoys the status of the second language all over the country. Yet, it still has the status of “Lingua Franca”.

1.3 STATUS OF ENGLISH AT SCHOOLS IN INDIA

The noteworthy point in the teaching of English in schools as second language is the shift of the focus from teaching English for learning literature to the teaching of English for the acquisition of language skills, which will enable the learner to learn the language mainly for its utilitarian values like communication, library reference and higher studies. With the recent shift in the objectives of learning, English is used mainly for communication purposes i.e. to acquire the mastery in the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, as per the connections given in the diagram on the next page, there is a need to implement the needed changes in the content, methods and evaluation also.
Now that the objective of learning English language is for communicative competence, depending on the skills that are on the focus, the methodology and the content which contribute towards achieving the specified objectives should be employed. And, periodically evaluating the extent to which the target skill has been acquired, helps us know how far we have achieved our objectives i.e. the communicative competence acquired through the target skills, thus the effective backwash can be of immense help in revising not only the content but also the methodology concerned.

Quite naturally, the content is not the same as we had for the learning of literature- the classics. The methods, no longer, are discourses or lectures but the language games involving the acquisition of the four skills ‘LSRW’ have acquired a main role. But all these will be futile if evaluation techniques are not improved to test the extent to which the skills have been mastered, in which case alone the needed feedback can be got.
A disastrous phenomenon that prevails in English learners at schools is that ‘English is being taught and bought and not learnt’. The notes dictated by the teachers from examination point of view and the easily accessible cheap bazaar guides have totally marred the originality and creativity in writing and the acquisition of the language skills in students. That is why the students fumble for words and fail in their expression of ideas. This is very much substantiated by the fact that even those students who score high marks in grammar seldom score even a pass mark in composition exercises.

There is a close relationship between the style and quality of learning and the scheme and methodology of testing. Unless the testing is oriented to the purposes of teaching, no worthwhile transformation in teaching-learning process can take place. In consonance with this philosophy, the scheme of evaluation in English has to be revamped so that both may interact with each other in close concert.

I.4 NEED FOR THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

The status of English as a second language today is much different from what it was in yester years. Now English is learnt mainly for communication and interaction through it and as a library language. In this context it is highly topical to think a while:

- Does a student’s score in English speak of the skills he or she has acquired in English?

- If so, why is often a so called High achiever - if we may decide by the
high score - unable to write even a paragraph or speak a few sentences correctly and cogently in English?

- Why does a good orator or essayist not score high, especially if his handwriting is not appealing?

- In what way does the content based testing of English vouchsafe accuracy in measuring one's communicative competence?

All these questions contributed to the researcher's enthusiasm to attempt skill based testing of English.

Furthermore, after graduation too English plays a main role in the admission for higher studies, be it Master of Science (M.S) or Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.). In the entrance tests for MBA or in the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), test of Spoken English (TSE) and Test of Written English (TWE), proficiency in English language is tested. These tests lay emphasis on Grammar, Vocabulary, Spoken English, Written English and Reading Comprehension in separate sections to evaluate an applicant's communicative competence in English.

At this juncture, it becomes immensely important to test the potential of the students with reference to each of the four skills LSRW - Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing - which are complemented by fluency and accuracy in the language - acquired through a rich fund of vocabulary and the knowledge of functional grammar. So, in this context comes the need to follow skill based teaching and testing of English, atleast from the middle school level upto the higher secondary school level so that at every stage the students' inadequacies in specific skills can be identified and on the basis of the feedback appropriate remedial teaching can be taken up.
Moreover, content based teaching and testing of a subject like History or Geography is vital and meaningful. But, in testing a language, though content is used as a medium to measure communicative skills, if we wrongly emphasize on the knowledge of the content—which is being done now—and ignore the skills, the result, often, is not only misleading and meaningless but is also, sometimes disastrous, for, language is not a mere tool for communication but is also a vehicle of values and carries the legacy of literature.

Bearing all the above factors in mind, an attempt has been made by the investigator to try out skill based approach in testing English. Before drafting the skill based test question paper, the investigator intends drafting a set of aims and teaching and testing objectives for the English taught as a second language in classes XI and XII, based on which the skill based test would be formulated.

I.5 FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH WORK:

Though skill based approach in communicative language approach envisages both skill based teaching and testing, the investigator restricts her work only to testing the skills in English as a second language, of a fairly wide sample of students using a test which is skill based, analysing the scores obtained by the students in the different areas of the skill based test to arrive at clear and correct conclusions and constructing sample exercise types in the areas of weakness.

I.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To draft a set of aims and course objectives that can be used for English taught as second language in classes XI and XII and