CHAPTER ONE : THE BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a broad view of the present situation in the teaching of writing while teaching English as a second language in India. It deals with an assessment of the existing teaching materials and a statement of reasons for need of an innovative approach to teaching of writing. The chapter also states the aim, scope and hypothesis of the present study. The discussion begins with a brief introduction to the vocational course of Functional English.

1.1 Functional English as a course

Functional English has been introduced by the UGC as a vocational course at the under-graduate level. It is being run in 15-20 colleges affiliated to all the three universities in Punjab and in the U.T. (Union Territory) of Chandigarh. This course is an attempt at rationalizing teaching of English, developing it not as another subject, but as a medium of expression. It is a massive exercise aiming to give teaching of English a totally new face - unorthodox, communicative and utilitarian. Being a job-oriented course, its objective is to motivate the budding graduates to seek self-employment, and to inculcate the spirit of entrepreneurship in them. Following have been suggested as potential areas that the students may take up for employment:

(A) Establish Private Enterprises like:
   (a) Tutorial Centre
   (b) Consultancy Services
   (c) Human Resource Centre for Service Industry
   (d) Video Filming Centre
   (e) Small Radio Programme Production Centre
   (f) Print and Graphic Arts Centre

(B) Seek Employment as:
   (a) Interviewer with TV/Radio/Newspaper
   (b) News Reader/Scriptwriter with TV/Radio/Newspaper
   (c) Compere with TV/Radio
   (d) Commentator with TV/Radio
   (e) Announcer with TV/Radio
   (f) Documentary Narrator/Script writer
This course, in comparison to the compulsory English course, aims more at purposeful teaching of English by developing and polishing the speech, oral, writing and study skills of the students. Development of writing skills is an area that the course puts a lot of emphasis on. A major avenue that the course aims at exploring is writing for official and journalistic purposes. It aims at training the students in script writing for different genres of print media, TV and radio broadcast for business purposes such as report-writing and for general writings such as letter-writing, paragraph-writing etc.

1.1.1 Objectives

Some objectives of these writing courses as stated by the three universities are as follows:

1. To enable the students to understand some of the basic grammatical concepts of English language in non-prescriptive rather than in descriptive manner.
2. To enable the students to learn grammatical categories while using them at the same time.
3. To help the students learn English in a more efficient and effective manner.
4. To enhance learners’ ability of communicating in the written mode with accuracy and fluency.
5. To train learners in the use of specific formats of written discourse.

1.1.2 Assessment of the present teaching materials

To achieve the objectives of this course, and for the intensive training that the course aims at, there needs to be a solid foundation. To lay down such a foundation, the three universities i.e. Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjabi University,
Patiala; and Panjab University, Chandigarh have designed their own course materials for teaching writing.

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar has a paper titled 'Remedial Grammar' (See Appendix 'A') in the first year of the course and another paper titled 'Writing Skills' (See Appendix 'B') in the second year of the course. Punjabi University, Patiala also has a paper titled 'Functional Grammar' (See Appendix 'C') in the first year of the course and another paper titled 'Writing Skills' (See Appendix 'D') in the second year of the course. Panjab University, Chandigarh has a paper titled 'Writing : Communication Skills and Study Skills' (See Appendix 'E') in the first year of the course.

The papers titled 'Remedial Grammar' and 'Functional Grammar' prescribed by Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and Punjabi University, Patiala respectively adopt similar methodology. Both use Collins Cobuild Student's Grammar and Practice Material by Dave Willis. This course primarily targets at strengthening the basic grammatical skills and their usage. These two universities have a paper titled 'Writing Skills' in the second year of the course. This paper aims at acquainting the students with concepts such as imaginative use of parts of speech, paragraph planning, reported speech, sentence connectors, sentence variations etc. Panjab University, Chandigarh introduces teaching of sub-skills of writing along with other types of writings such as letter-writing, paragraph-writing and report-writing in the very first year of the course. Unlike the two other universities, this university does not prescribe any material for strengthening knowledge of basic grammatical concepts and their usage. All the three universities have papers related to radio and TV Journalism, Print Journalism, entrepreneurship development in the second or/and third year/s of the course.

Regarding the courses prescribed to build grammatical competence by GNDU (Guru Nanak Dev University), Amritsar; and Punjabi University, Patiala, this researcher is of the viewpoint that teaching structures and their usage so extensively at this stage, only reveals an over-concern with 'form'. Writing at this level, needs to be taught more as an amalgamation of various sub-skills which are finally given a correct form rather than as something which has to be grammatically correct in the first place. Moreover, the students had been learning somewhat similar things up to their senior secondary level and also learn them in their compulsory English courses at undergraduate level. The goals that have been set for this course would be hard to
achieve with over-emphasis on teaching of structures only. Teaching sub-skills of writing and practising letter-writing, precis-writing, paragraph-writing, paraphrasing and expansion, descriptive writing, report writing, script writing for announcement, compering etc. in the second year of the course is also late, keeping in mind the goals of the course. Only Panjab University, Chandigarh has included teaching a few sub-skills of writing in the first year of the course. This university also teaches different types of paragraph-writing, letter-writing and report-writing in the same year.

1.2 Why Functional English?

Following are the reasons for conducting this study with regard to the course of Functional English.

(A) Researcher's Familiarity with the situation

One reason for conducting the study on the course of FE (Functional English) is the researcher's experience of teaching the subject. As a researcher, the researcher felt that the unorthodox type of writings that the students of this course are required to produce (such as official, journalistic, and business writings) may not be attempted successfully with a traditional approach to writing. These writings require high level of creative and organizational skills along with grammatical competence, whereas, the traditional approach is over-concerned with grammatical correctness and does not lay required emphasis on the other aspects of writing. The researcher also felt that adopting a different approach to writing would be beneficial for the students of this course. Moreover, there are no help-books available in the market for this course and the students need to go about on their own which would prove to be hard if the traditional approach, (in which a 'model' is central) continues to be followed.

(B) Relevant to begin with a small group

Another reason for conducting this study with regard to the course of FE is that FE classes are comparatively smaller in size than compulsory English classes and it is always better to introduce a new thing on a small scale. The 'process' approach to writing requires a 'managable' classroom in which students can interact easily among themselves and with the teacher. It would also be easier for the teacher to make the
students understand and adopt the 'process' of writing if the class is not as big as it generally is in compulsory English classrooms.

1.3 The Present Situation

Following are a few features of the situation as can be observed:

1.3.1 Difficult shift from compulsory English Courses

It can be observed that the students find the sudden shift from the traditional compulsory English courses to the vocational course of FE difficult as this course is unconventional and demands huge amount of extra effort from them. Although before this level also, they had been writing essays, letters, paragraph, summaries etc., yet perhaps they would not have even heard about TV journalism, script writing and Business Communication. They were learning English, as Giescke (1980 cited in R. Rossner and R. Bolitho eds. 1990:23) points out not as a 'functional tool for communication in different setting', but as a codified system representing the linguistic characteristics of an idealised American or Briton (Nakayama 1982 cited in R. Rossner and R. Bolitho eds. 1990:123). The focus while teaching in our classrooms has always been on the grammatical features of English without regard for its communicative functions. The priorities of this course are different and the students find it difficult to adjust.

1.3.2 Some Common Anxieties

The fear of writing incorrectly grips the learners. They stop trying to write and thus get out of practice, which makes the matters worse. They are hit by the 'something wrong syndrome which means that 'there is a condition hindering them in their effort to write properly' (Michael Newby 1989:5), which, infact, is not the case. The learners are over concerned about 'What if I get it wrong?', 'what if I can't make myself clear?', 'what will the others think?', 'what will the lecturer think?' etc. and this over concern affects their writing to a great degree.
1.3.3 Learners interested but confused

The students accustomed to cramming a set of items and reproducing the same in the examination feel confused about how to approach the different types of tasks that they are required to perform during this course. They fancy being good writers, along with being good speakers of the language, but the wide-spread notions such as 'good-writers are born like that' put them in a dilemma, and they are not sure whether they would be able to become accomplished writers or not.

1.3.4 Learners too old to learn the basics

It can be conveniently observed that a majority of learners from rural, semi-urban and even urban areas do not hold a strong grammar and vocabulary base, which is vital for effective writing. Once they get promoted from senior secondary to college level, their teachers and they themselves start believing that they are too old to learn the basic skills.

Another thing that the teachers wonder about is how, the students, who can hardly study the compulsory English course, would be able to study the course of FE which is so much more demanding in comparison. Though there is a lot of justification in their fear, yet this should not be a reason for depriving these students of an opportunity to mend the matters, to improve and to venture into areas which hitherto were supposed to be territories exclusive for public and convent school pass-outs.

1.3.5 Learning 'a threat'

As a teacher herself, the researcher observed that learners at this level, being adults, develop 'a feeling of threat to self-esteem which accompanies the act of learning' (CF.Rogers 1969 cited in R.Rossner and R.Bolitho eds. 1990:129). It is observed that 'adults in particular develop negative feelings in a learning situation, because they feel that their whole personality is put at risk, and that they are in danger of losing their self-respect if they admit to not knowing'. Thus, 'learning turns into a protective affair, where people learn things simply to shield themselves from the accusations of stupidity emanating from the teacher, their peers, or their conscience' (Alan Maley 1990:129). Lozanov (1978 cited in R.Rossner and R.Bolitho eds., 1990 : 129-30) has also pointed out the way in which most classroom situations give off the
negative suggestion that 'what is to be learned is difficult and unlikely to be learned successfully' as a result, the learners get the feeling of an 'impossibly high wall to scale'.

1.3.6 Lack of Motivation

It has been observed that the students do not enjoy writing very much. The type of writing most of the students indulge in up to this level has a great bearing on their attitude. For them, writing was an activity which they indulged in only at the time of exams or occasional class-tests up to this level. They were required to produce a limited but essential range of forms of written English by which their success in the field of study was judged. They were trapped in a spiral of failure in which they didn't practise writing because of fear of failure and because they didn't practise, they remained poor writers. After several years of such practice, this situation unfortunately, seems to have become permanent.

1.3.7 Teachers in a Traditional Role

Teaching and learning are a combined operation, but in most of our classrooms learning occupies the back seat as Li Xiaoju (1990:68) in reference to the situation in China mentions 'The tradition of the teacher occupying the centre of the classroom is still very much alive'. A host of studies (e.g. Barnes 1976, Stubbs 1976) testify to the way typical classroom interactions are teacher-dominating, leaving little psychological space for student initiative. Much teaching, is still of 'the lockstep' variety in which the class is put through the same hoops at the same time, irrespective of individual ability or inclination (Alan Maley, 1990:128). While it is true that it is the teacher's responsibility to provide a framework of over all control within which learning can take place, but as Maley again (1990:128) confirms, 'an over-emphasis on control will stultify the learning process', and this is exactly what is happening in our classrooms as well.

1.3.8 Teachers in a dilemma

Many of the teachers find themselves in a dilemma as to what their job is - teaching write better English or teaching write better in English, most of them consider the first one as their primary job. A majority of the teachers at the UG level still
believe that teaching writing is not their job, it's a school teacher's job. Many teachers, however, do feel that writing has been 'the poor relation' in the language teaching developments of the last many years. They acknowledge importance of writings but despair of finding interesting way of teaching it (Arthur Brooks, Peter Grundy, 1990:6).

1.3.9 Lack of Orientation

Teachers who have been teaching the compulsory English courses for years (in which they only deliver lectures and evaluate examination sheets) need orientation to handle a specialized course like FE. This course requires an unorthodox approach in which the teacher should 'let the students go through the process of learning, provide conditions for the process, set it going, observe it, try to understand it, give guidance, help it along, analyse and evaluate it' (Li Xiaoju, 1990:68). 'Learner training' as R.L. Allwright (1990:141) confirms 'is not going to be done well by teachers who believe that, since only they have the necessary expertise, only they can be allowed a responsible role in the management of language learning. Teachers need to be trained to help learners develop their expertise as learners to help their learners become independent of them so that they can continue to learn efficiently after the course is over'.

1.3.10 Non-availability of text-books

Non-availability of text books for a new and unorthodox type of course is seen as a problem by both the teachers as well as the students. The teachers are of the view that only reference books are not enough to equip the learners sufficiently to handle the job ahead. A text-book with relevant guiding material is urgently required. The learners feel that consulting a long list of reference books without any prescribed practice material for discourse writing dampens their spirits. Moreover, 'the comfort of the traditional text-analysis syllabus' in which 'the content and design of the course are determined not by the students' needs but by the 'texts' while are selected solely for their literary value' (Li Xiaoju, 1990:67) is hard to do away with.
1.3.11 Lack of group activities

As against the belief that 'the students learn a lot by working together in groups to solve a problem or make a decision and that the learners should share their knowledge, compare their opinions and discuss their ideas in small groups before going on to classwork or individual work' (Coe, Rycraft and Ernest 1983:4), writing is not a group activity in most of the FE classrooms. On the contrary, students are expected to perform the tasks individually with some feedback from the teacher. Only a few teachers, though, encourage their students to work in pairs and check each others' work.

1.3.12 Secondary to Spoken English

Being a media-oriented course, FE is seen more as a glamorous course that would teach the learners how to speak English. This misconception is in tune with the belief that spoken language is primary and written language is secondary. Such beliefs are particularly wide spread among rural and semi-urban learners. What they fail to realize is that 'in ordinary life written and spoken language are more interrelated than what we are accustomed to thinking...both in logic and in practice the spoken and the written mode share more common purposes than we sometimes realize.' (Arthur Brooks, Peter Grundy, 1990:17).

1.3.13 System of evaluation : a demotivating effect

A common practice is that the students are not awarded for what they get right, but are reprimanded for what they get wrong. This also contributes in leading the students into a 'spiral of failure' (mentioned in 1.3.6). This is a genuine problem as (Ibid:61) also observe 'an overemphasis within the educational system on grading' results in the stilling of experimentation and relaxed practice.'

1.3.14 Insufficient Time

There is a strong contention that taking the students from where they are to where they are expected to be by the end of the three-year degree course, with one academic session lasting hardly six effective months, is not feasible. The teachers also
feel concerned about completing the syllabus in the stipulated time and thus contend that there is not much time left for experimenting with new ideas.

1.3.15 Grammar means structures

In majority of the classrooms, FE is taught just as another subject, like maths or history. Grammar is still viewed as a collection of certain definitions, rules, parts of speech, types of sentences, transformation etc. These aspects are considered of primary importance without which it is useless to proceed further into writing activity. This attitude subscribes to the view that language should be learnt first and put to use afterwards and that students should be made to 'learn bits of the target language by mimickery and memorization ('mim-mem'), and only after that they have learnt these things, begin using them' (Lixiaoju, 1990:61,62). He also emphasizes that because learning and using are thus separated. 'People find a justification not to include the use of language in the learning process (Ibid, 62). Learning a language, consequently, comes to mean only the mastery of form.

1.4 Need for an Innovative Approach

In view of the present situation and the demands of the course, there is an immediate need for an innovative approaches to writing. It has to be realised that the type of writing required to be produced during this course, if attempted with the traditional approach to writing, may not prove to be as effective as desired. The traditional approach to writing which overconcemed with form, is less likely to help the learners to achieve the high level of competence required by the targeted professions. There is an urgent need of an approach which liberates the 'thoughts' of the writers from the prison of 'form'. There is a need for an approach which is 'learner centered', in which the teacher is not the 'director' but another 'participant'; which provides 'tolerant and co-operative environment'; which encourages 'group-work'; and most importantly, which sees learning as a 'process' which emphasizes on thinking, planning, drafting, revising, editing etc. and developing the sub-skills of writing such as organization, coherence and cohesion along with developing the grammatical competence of the learners.

As there are no text books available for the course and the writings required to be produced are of unorthodox types, such an approach to writing is required which
can reduce the dependence of the students upon a 'model' and can help them become independent. A process approach to writing which emphasis on the various steps of writing such as brain-storming, note-making, drafting, editing, re-writing etc. can equip the learners with the 'technique' of writing and can help the students to become more independent than they presently are.

There is also a need to strike some balance in our present system of evaluation. The entire 'process' of learning writing needs to be assessed; rewarded or reprimanded rather than only the final 'product' being subjected to these treatments. This kind of practice would, certainly, force the learners in initial states, to go through certain steps of the writing 'process' (which may seem contradictory to the theory of 'liberation' of the learner); but it would also be helpful in understanding and 'acquisition' of the process, making it a habit it would go a long way in developing and polishing the writing skills of the learners. This practice of assessing the entire process may be withdrawn at a later stage when the learners have realized the importance of these preliminary activities and have adopted them.

1.5 Hypothesis

On the basis of my classroom teaching experience, I have found that the present 'product' oriented approach which is widely adopted in our FE classrooms for teaching of writing do not equip the learners sufficiently to meet the challenge thrown by the profession of journalism and their vocations which the students are likely to take up. There is the need of an approach which would help them realize that writing is not only putting words and sentences in a linear order, it is also about discovering ideas, setting-goals, mind-mapping, drafting, revising, editing and such activities. There is the need of an approach which would make the students independent by making them learn practise these steps involved in the writing process.

1.6 Aim and Scope

This study aims at:

a) ascertaining the existing levels of grammatical and discourse competence, the range of vocabulary and the ability to use it appropriately, the organizational skills and the overall communicative effect achieved in their writings by the students, who have opted for the vocational course of FE at the UG level.
b) constructing relevant tasks and materials for the learners in order to take writing in English from the artificial and unrealistic compositions to become more genuine, practical and relevant through a process-oriented approach. It aims to optimize the process of writing, placing it in a more realistic context, making it as communicative and functional as possible.

The scope of this study is limited to the vocational course of FE being taught as an optional course in various colleges all over Punjab. However, only the students of TDC-I would be subjected to the two tasks in order to determine their levels of competence in the above-mentioned areas at the entry level of the course. Further, after determination of the levels of competence of these learners, a few tasks are proposed to be prepared as materials for helping the learners 'understand' and 'acquire' the process of writing. Such tasks are considered as likely to be helpful for the students of all the three years, in going about their writing course in a more independent and effective manner.