Chapter I

The Teaching of English

1.0 Introduction

The spread of English round the world -- in the wake of trade, empire-building, migration and settlement -- has ensured the teaching of the language a central role in the educational history of every country on earth.

And today, learning the language seems to be a widely accepted objective; and proficiency in English is considered essential not only for higher professional and vocational education, but also for a higher standard of life. It is an accepted precept that proficiency in anything, not to speak of proficiency in English, is the result of teaching -- which involves a content and a method

1.1 Contents and Methods of Language Teaching

Teaching involves making learners master a content, which will be useful as knowledge/skill. For this purpose, a method is to be adopted and it is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material. But down the ages there has been no constant principle relating to content as well as method. Each has varied from time to time and from place to place depending upon the circumstances (see 1.3).

But has there been a constant principle governing the relationship between content and method? It is necessary to explore this relationship, briefly at least. The historical perspective (see 1.2) and the English Language Teaching System in India
(see 1.4) aim to do this. Ultimately these sections reveal that there has been no all time finality about the relationship between content and method.

In general the content is fixed by the thought and necessity of a particular period/place, and though a method is suggested, it invariably undergoes variations soon after. More than in the past, today the rigidity of content is brought about by the syllabus-makers who are invariably not the teachers who actually teach that content. So when the content is fixed what the teacher has freedom over is only the method. The examination system also adds to this rigidity, and teaching the subject is in more demand than teaching the learner is. Yet learners resist mechanical teaching of the subject, and so the teacher with his limited freedom, tries to adopt a method which enables him to teach the subject and at the same time be appealing to the learners.

Hence the basis for the hypothesis of this thesis (see 1.6) is an outcome of this fundamental belief that even when the content cannot be changed, the teacher with his freedom over methodology can successfully help learners to cope with the demands of English in the present day.

1.2 English Teaching Methods: A Historical Perspective

It would be wrong to divorce English language teaching from its broader educational and intellectual context. Neither will it be proper to study the various methods of teaching English in an isolated manner; for they reflect cultural and educational patterns that require to be explored in their own time and context. Progress in the teaching of a language is neither a function solely of the application of
theoretical principle (method) nor of an unthinking reaction to the demands of the immediate market (content), “but of the alchemy which, whether by accident or by design, unites them to a common purpose” (Howatt xiv). The two factors of this function are seen fused in different proportions in these methods, resulting in situations leading to the fact that there has not been an all-time finality about the relationship between what is taught and how it is taught.

Each of the methods is described by analysing a) its principle b) its merits c) its demerits d) its relevance to the present language teaching system, and e) its other significant features, if any

1.2.1 The Text and Dialogue Method

This is one of the oldest methods of language teaching of the Middle Ages; it is also known as the Catechistic Method. The language teaching materials of this method relied mainly on texts; and the use of dialogues was a long established tradition in the teaching of spoken Latin in the middle ages.

The Latin text consisted of a series of questions and answers relating to topics and activities of everyday rural life, farming, hunting, trading and so on. These were familiar to the young learners who were being trained in elementary Latin.

a) Principle  In the Catechistic techniques, questions were used as prompts to memory and served to break the texts into digestible chunks which could be learnt by heart. The learner had to do all the work of memorizing and the teacher had to prompt him with questions in order to ‘hear’ the lesson.
b) **Merits:** This was a long established tradition, and was the obvious type to choose. There had always been a constant urge among the learners for a grammatical description of the language; this being absent, the dialogue form served them well; and their aspirations for perfection, forced them to draw the best out of it till they could find a better method. Validity-wise, this method was considered better than the prevalent oral method.

What the learners sought to learn (i.e. the content) was learnt perfectly and was imbedded in their minds for future use. Since the dialogues dealt with topics and activities of everyday life, the learners saw a practical use in learning them. Further the demand on the learners was more than that on the teacher -- and this is one of the principles of language teaching of our time.

c) **Demerits:** However this method cannot be said to be carrying an advantage for the teacher, can the teacher simply 'hear' the lesson and say that he has done his work? Too much importance is given to memorization. Learning by memorization is also questionable; and further this method makes the teacher superfluous; and the demand on the learner is too much

d) **Relevance** This method has some relevance to the modern language teaching method. Modern language teaching dialogues did not of course adopt all the features of the Catechistic method, but they grew out of the same procedural tradition and carried some of its advantages for the teacher.
1.2.2 The Double Translation Method:

This prevailed in the sixteenth century. After the children had had a thorough grasp of the pronunciation and could produce the sentence fluently, they were asked to turn their lesson out of Latin/French into English, and then out of English into Latin/French. It was expected that by the end of the lesson, they would probably know the text by heart.

a) Principle: Howatt analyses this method and points out six stages involved (34): From this Translatio, the child moves to Imitatio (creating his own Latin and Greek texts on the model of the great authors). The next four steps are designed to exercise stylistic flexibility: Paraphrasis (reformulation), Epitome (summarizing), Metaphrasis (transforming a text from poetry to prose and vice versa) and Declamatio (public eloquence).

b) Merits: It gives equal status to both the foreign text and the equivalent text in the mother tongue. The ultimate aim is to recreate the original Latin text accurately; for it is not enough to produce a hurried and half-hearted gloss, namely just translating once only from Latin to English. Also the method is intended to make the learner equally conscious of the structure and resources of his own language.

c) Demerits: Here is an overly fussy concern for style at the expense of content. Howatt substantiates this by saying “‘Delicate learning’, as Bacon called it in his critical review of contemporary education [ . . . ] consisted merely of ‘vain affectations’ and he concluded, ‘substance of matter is better than beauty of words’
Further in this method, the learning of grammar is made subservient to the study of the original text.

d) Relevance: Here the content is held constant while the resource of both the languages are manipulated to express 'a common array of meanings (34). Grammar was used very sparingly; inductive grammar was adopted; the next person, Joseph Webbe (1560 – 1633) dispensed with grammar altogether Howatt points out that Webbe had claimed in his treatise on method called An Appeal to Truth (1622) that 'no man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled and ingiv'd with grammar precepts' (Howatt 34). According to Webbe the proper starting point for language learning was the exercise of communication skills which would lead to knowledge of the grammar through use

During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the 'no grammar' trend prevailed and was supported, to some extent, by Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670) and James Hamilton (1769-1829) Comenius's philosophy of learning is seen by Howatt as a challenge for the language teacher

It is here that the abiding challenge of Comenius lies for the teacher of languages how can the teacher come to terms with the fact that language is not the object of learning but the outcome, the product of interplay between the learner and 'the great and common world'? (50)

James Hamilton revived the old technique of interlinear translation. He insisted on literal translation rather than a literary re-working of the foreign language text.
e) **Summary:** Mention must be made of Webbe’s attempt to place communication skills above grammar. It is also interesting to note that the activity of transforming a text from poetry to prose and vice versa had been indulged in mainly for language learning and not so much for appreciation, as in the later periods of time.

1.2.3 **The Grammar Translation Method:**

Even in the second half of the seventeenth century the innovatory ideas of Comenius and others were frustrated by the reassertion of the traditional grammar school. Guy Miege (1644-1718) disapproved of learning a language without grammar rules, referring to it as ‘properly building in the Air’ (Howatt 57). The method in use in schools in the nineteenth century was the method in which grammar and translation predominated.

a) **Principle:** It preserved the basic framework of grammar and translation because those were already familiar both to teachers and pupils from their classical studies. Its principal aim was to make language learning easier. The central feature was the replacement of the traditional text by well-chosen sentences. The emphasis was on practice in translating sentences and stress on accuracy; these sentences were embedded with grammatical elements and served as model sentences. Here language learning was an exercise in mental discipline.

b) **Merits** and demerits: It is for use in secondary schools. It can be called “The Grammar School Method”, since its strengths, weaknesses, and excesses reflected the requirements, aspirations, and ambitions of the nineteenth century grammar school in its various guises in different countries.
As rightly pointed out by S. Venkitachalam (1981), this method has many weaknesses. It treats all languages as if they were dead; as if each consisted of a collection of ancient documents to be deciphered; it identifies 'linguistics' with 'literary tradition'. It ignores phonetics, pronunciation, acoustic image and cares for alphabets, spelling and writing system, but no speech exercise; it assumes translation to be the main and only procedure for learning vocabulary, it assumes that mastery of word or sentence-structure is to be attained mainly through memorizing grammar rules.

c) Relevance: The traditional scholastic approach among individual learners in the eighteenth century became ill-suited to the capabilities of younger school pupils; further the scholastic methods were self-study methods which were inappropriate for group-teaching in a classroom. The grammar-translation method was an attempt to adapt these traditions to the circumstances and requirements of schools. It cared for translation of sentences, practice, accuracy and intrinsic moral value through discipline. It catered for the needs of the middle class children outside the ancient public schools.

d) Summary: It accorded too special a status to the sentence at the expense of the text. The stress on accuracy, the obsession with completeness, and the neglect of spoken language induced reformers like Henry Sweet and W.H. Widgery to seek the help of the universities to reform this method.
1.2.4 The Natural Method

It was the outcome of a strong reaction against the classical method, towards the close of the nineteenth century. It was inspired by the humanitarian values of Romantic Naturalism.

a) Principle: Learning how to speak a new language is not a rational process which can be organized in a step-by-step manner following graded syllabuses. It is an intuitive process for which human beings have a natural capacity that can be awakened provided only that the following conditions exist. Put simply, there are three such conditions: someone to talk to, something to talk about, and a desire to understand and make yourself understood. (Howatt 192)

Interaction or conversation is at the heart of natural language acquisition. As pointed out by Venkitachalam, if a child heard a lot of English spoken, he would naturally imbibe it.

The essence of this method can be summed up thus: “Teach the spoken language first, relate the words of the new language directly to their referents in the outside world, practise, and work as hard as possible to gain and keep the learner’s interest” (Howatt 196).

b) Merits and demerits: The child acquires the language without the strains caused by grammatical rules. It adopts the psychologists’ maxim: “follow Nature”.

But the conversation necessarily turns upon trivial subjects; and the teacher is required to do a disproportionate share of work.
c) **Relevance:** This method requires a maximum exposure to foreign language atmosphere; the use of the mother-tongue and translation are ruled out. The true roots of natural language teaching methods lie deep in the act of teaching itself.

d) **Summary:** Considering the above features, we can say that Natural method is nothing but a 'mirror image' of rational teaching methods of the Reform Movement.

1.2.5 **The Direct Method**

This is a logical extension of the Natural Method, but more systematic. It has been influenced by the behaviourist school of psychology.

a) **Principle:** Language was believed to be a skill subject; the key to language learning lay in association -- association between experience and its expression in a foreign language. This was adopted by Henry Sweet (1845-1912) and Otto Jesperson (1860-1942).

b) **Merits and demerits:** Oral work was stressed; speech and phonetics were given importance; it avoided translation fully and thereby attracted the attacks by educationalists like Palmer and Scott.

It ignored certain fundamental aspects of the foreign language-learning situation; the teacher may not use translation, but it does not mean that the pupil excludes it from his own mind. Translation is excluded at the expense of intelligibility; foreign language cannot be acquired as mother tongue is acquired; there is too much oral work at the expense of other language skills.
c) Summary: The Natural Method and the Direct Method are historically very important. Their view of language as speech and their stress on habit formation through repetition have had commendable influence on modern language pedagogy. The main weakness of these methods was that they rested on an over simplification of the process of learning a foreign language, and ignored the realities of the classroom situation.

1.2.6 Other Methods and Trends

a) Selection and Control of Vocabulary: The Direct Method neglected the fact that the selection of language material for instruction and gradation are important aspects of language teaching. If teaching is to be effective, the pace of learning must be steady. Language is an instrument of living communication and a form of social behaviour; language is as complex as life itself, and therefore selection and grading are important; new tools must be used in grading. The pioneer of this idea was E.L. Thorndike. His empiricism and devotion to S-R psychology demanded a bond between words and their meanings. If teaching is to be effective and economical, we must think of frequency and usefulness of words. Others of this school of thought are Palmer in Japan, Michael West in India and Ogden in England.

b) Michael West's Reading Method: Learning to read a foreign language is easier than learning to speak. Reading is the most important aim in the case of learning a foreign language. West prepared a number of textbooks and supplementary readers based on carefully chosen vocabulary. He believed that passive skills are more important in learning a foreign language.
It was not successful because, the exclusive emphasis on reading in the initial stages made language learning very dull and uninteresting. Yet, West's views served as a corrective to the advocates of Direct Method who neglected the passive skills in language learning. Reading is essential and it should be given due importance.

c) The Structural Syllabus: This can be traced to the work of Palmer (1877-1949). Learning words is not the most important thing in language learning. In English, word-order is of importance; learning English is largely a matter of acquiring a structural framework. The emphasis should be not on acquisition of vocabulary, but on the ability to operate the basic structures of language. This can be said to be the modified Direct Method.

In 1921, Palmer pointed out that pattern practice is the important part in the learning of a language and that a grading of structures also is necessary.

d) Development between the two wars: C.C.Fries, Bloomfield and Sapir made linguistic analysis of the language and promoted objective study of language on the basis of its structural patterning. Armed Specialized Training Programme was the method suggested by these linguists. It advocated an accurate imitation of the natural conversation of native speakers; and consequently came the practical use of mimicry, memorization and pattern drill.

e) The Empiricists and the Rationalists: In 1940s and 1950s the empiricists (behaviourists) promoted audio lingualism which led to the audio-lingual method of mimicry, memorization and pattern drill.
Recently the Rationalists (cognitivists) questioned this; they promoted the cognitive code; to them language learning is insight getting and rule governed activity. Dodson adopted the affective/humanistic approach. Combining the above two theories he formulated the Bilingual Method. It allows use of mother tongue by the teacher. It also stresses the need to develop fluency in speech through pattern drills. It uses all the four skills simultaneously.

f) The other milestones:


1965: Chomsky’s theory of Syntax


1967: Pit Corder’s ‘The significance of learner’s errors’

1972: Sinclair’s and Quirk’s Contributions.

Widdowson’s ‘Teaching of English as Communication’


1979: Brumfit and Johnson’s ‘The communicative Approach’

1981: SLAL (Second Language Acquisition and Learning)

Current Trends:

ESP (English for Specific Purposes)

CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning)

Use of media and technology for English language teaching.
1.2.7. Summary

A comparative study of the above methods reveals that though all of them aim at teaching the language, they have adopted different ways of teaching it. What has been found to be good in one method has been set aside in the next. There have been a number of factors behind these variations.

1.3 Factors Influencing Language Teaching

1.3.1 Attitudes towards Languages

The major general attitudes towards language from time to time influenced language teaching at that time.

1) The necessity to learn a foreign language was there in the remote past also; a foreign language had to be learnt almost as the mother tongue was learnt, by direct, living contact with the native speakers, and by imitation and reproduction of the sounds, words and sentences; there was no systematic study of grammar structures.

2) In the ancient times, during the middle ages and during the renaissance, stress was on imitation and practice; there was excessive dependence on memory and there was a lack of uniformity. The oral approach and the catechistic approach belong to these periods.

3) In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries translation was given importance; there were oral translation, interlinear translation and translation on the facing page; grammar was used sparingly, and finally pushed to the last. The Double Translation approach belongs to this period.
4) The eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries’ attitude towards language was that of an organism. Language was supposed to have birth, growth and decay. This underscored the importance of the stable aspect in preference to the transient and the evanescent aspect of language. Since script was somehow considered to have bestowed a degree of permanence to the language, learning of language had to be viewed as manipulating a code. The teachers following this approach almost take it for granted that audio-lingual competence would automatically follow the graphic skill.

5) In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the attitude towards language underwent a significant change. The biological model was discarded in favour of a logical model, and the historical-philological approach yielded room to the descriptive. The impact of psychology began to be felt and learning of language was recognized as inculcation of verbal behaviour.

The descriptive approach viewed language as an edifice, and emphasized the pattern practice type of learning. Sentences were looked upon as mere synthetic linkage of words in a grammatical structure.

6) It is only in more recent times that the full implication of language teaching as inculcation of verbal behaviour is accepted. Proficiency in language is no longer dependant on how well students reproduce sentences, but the skill they show in generating new ones. Manipulation of language structure helps the learner to carry on genuine conversation in the language. “In other words, it is now recognized that language is best taught as a concomitant of appropriate behaviour in a communication situation rather than as a step towards it” (Pattanayak 3).
1.3.2 Attitudes towards Grammar

The classroom techniques have also been influenced by the attitudes towards grammar. For example (1) The Grammar-Translation method is tied with the traditional approach to grammar; grammar is taught as an abstract rational discipline and (2) The Direct Method is objective in approach and implicitly admits the primacy of speech; it favours direct imitation; it believes that the use of the language will make evident the grammatical relationships.

1.3.3 Basic Attitudes towards Language Today

The modern language teaching/learning system has been influenced by these basic attitudes:

1) Language is a system and language is vocal; language is primarily observed as speech; anything written is a secondary representation of speech. “Hence the ability to decipher and reproduce the written language is not the mastery over a language” (Pattanayak 6).

2) Both in space and in style, language is culture-oriented. Language is both the product and the expression of culture.

3) Language changes both horizontally and vertically, both in space and time and this causes variations in standard and poses problems for teaching and learning.

4) Each language is unique; each language has to be studied in terms of its own system. But unfortunately the Greko-Latin model was imposed in the teaching
of English in the past. That is why the transition from the old grammar-translation method to the modern aural-oral instruction has proved more difficult.

5) Language is made up of habits. "A language at the initial stage has to be learnt as a skills subject like typewriting or motor driving. The reflexes have to be so trained, the structures are to be so internalised that one can concentrate on what to speak rather than on how to speak" (Pattanayak 6)

6) Language is meant for communication; language habits are acquired through practice and not through prescription. Learning to talk about language will not help one to talk the language exactly as talking about the typewriter will not help one to type.

1.3.4 Wrong Attitudes towards Language Today

The modern language teaching/learning system has also been adversely affected by these attitudes:

1) Advocates of modern technology (audio visual, for example) in the teaching of English over-emphasise the usefulness of the gadget and substitute the gadget for the teacher.

2) Advocates of a particular new method/approach/technique become blind to the merits of other methods.

3) The grammarians (following the advocates of grammar translation method or the structuralists) are obsessed with their rules. "They all forget that rules give
information about the language, and learning rules implies learning about the language, but not learning the language" (Pattanayak 7).

4) The modern language teachers fail to note that no one method is adequate to sustain the interest of the child at all stages and ages.

1.3.5 Summary

The teaching of language has been influenced by people's attitude to language and the linguists' attitude to grammar. Now it is accepted that speaking the language is more important than talking about the language; modern technology has widely influenced language teaching; yet it cannot be a substitute to the language teacher. What is most needed is communicative competence. Language is a rule governed behaviour and the stage of transition from a limited sample or a limited performance to unlimited competence has to be passed by a learner. The whole process of acquisition of this competence remains a mystery for everybody even today.

1.4 English Language Teaching in India:

No comprehensive survey of English teaching methods in our schools in the past century is available. However an idea of the general situation can be gleaned from the various government reports, the school textbooks and the personal experience of the generation that went to school in the twenties and the thirties and a few research reports.
The method in use in schools at the beginning of the century was the Grammar-Translation Method. It was the method in which grammar and translation predominated; formal grammar reigned supreme.

The Direct Method found wide acceptance at the official level. Its ban on the use of the mother-tongue was very significant; there had been a gradual weakening of the teaching of formal grammar.

1920s and 30s: This period was unmistakably marked by pioneering work in the twin fields of vocabulary selection and reading. A substantial progress was made towards a scientific approach to language teaching.

In the 1930s, West and Palmer were steadily gaining ground; but during the war and then after the independence, there was no much progress in the teaching of English.

Thus until the mid-fifties, officially the Direct Method was advocated; but everywhere, except in English medium schools, Grammar-Translation was the method practised almost universally. Even this method was usually followed in a mutilated form -- with grammar being not paid much attention and translation by itself constituting the method.

In later fifties and sixties, consequent on the changed position of English in the country, especially the graded adoption of Indian Language as the media of secondary and higher education, a great need was felt for the improvement of materials and the methods of teaching English at all levels. There was the large-scale acceptance of the structural approach to the teaching of English.
Those twenty five years (including the seventies) had perhaps been the most-eventful in the annals of English teaching in India. There had been the introduction of new syllabus and new materials, systematic in-service training and English language institutes to give this training, materials production and research.

The eighties posed a new challenge to the ELT methodologist. The problem was clearly one of developing methods to meet adequately the specific needs in different parts of the country.

From the end of the twentieth century and especially from the beginning of the new century, the teaching of English has been very much influenced by modern technology. The impact is so strong that now the teachers of English begin to wonder whether technology is a boon or bane to the teaching of English.

1.5 English Language Teaching at the Tertiary Level in India

In spite of the innovations and efforts described above to promote quality teaching/learning of English, at the school level, students entering college fall short of the standards expected of them. The college teacher now has to provide much of the elementary learning which should have taken place at schools; he has to wipe out the effects of bad learning which, if allowed to linger, would militate against further learning.

The atmosphere at the college level also is not very conductive. Factors like (1) the curriculum, (2) the course, (3) the classroom technique and (4) the system of evaluation are not taken in the right perspective by the curriculum designers, the
teachers and the learners. The following sections describes each of these factors and how each of them is treated today at the college level. Other factors like a) the mental status of a college student, b) the position of English in India today and c) the compulsion of teaching language through literature are also discussed.

1.5.1 The Curriculum

The curriculum is not merely the list of subjects, topics and books. It should define completely the educational needs of the learner and identify the means to fulfil them. It should provide a comprehensive plan on which the entire system of learning and teaching should be based

Unfortunately most curricula for English neglect to do this. They give nothing more than a list of topics and books to be studied for the examination. No attempt is made to relate the study of English to the actual needs of the learners. Appendix 14 gives the syllabus for I year undergraduate class of the Madras University. It merely gives the looks and objectives and enlists the skills and subskills to be developed. The description of the ways in which these skills are achieved, appears to be vague and general. The curriculum fails to visualize all kinds of experiences that may be used in providing the desired learning.

The ancient gurus provided their shishyas such experience through discourses delivered orally. This is what the popular system of teaching through lectures is intended to do -- though it is not always effective. But there are other means too: the reading of books, the viewing of pictures, the understanding of 'tasks' which incorporate a
particular kind of experience, etc. For effective learning a variety of learning experiences is best. (Ghosh, Sastri, and Das 6)

1.5.2 The Course

The course is not just a set of books. The course includes all the resources which are employed in the implementation of the objectives stated in the curriculum. The tendency at the college level is to rely mainly on literary texts. Books -- of any kind -- should constitute only a part of a language course, not the whole of it; a good course must be balanced. But when books are used, we must ensure that they are of the right sort and have been carefully planned and written for the purpose for which they are being used. Judged by this criterion, most of the books used for teaching English at the college level are unsuitable.

1.5.3 The Classroom Techniques

If the curriculum gives the blueprints, the course gives the tools to be used in teaching. But it is the teacher who has to make use of these tools, and the way he uses these tools constitutes the technique; a good technique demands training and experience. But in our college, we do not hesitate to put inadequate teaching tools into the hands of young teachers who have had no training whatsoever in the use and ask them to perform the most difficult of operations – teaching. The Methodology mentioned in Appendix 14 also demands the teacher’s effective involvement.
1.5.4 The System of Evaluation

Examination should serve as a check on the entire system of teaching. The performance of the students should provide the 'feed-back' which curriculum planners, text book writers and teachers need, in order to find out if they are proceeding on the right lines. As such, examinations are an integral part of the teaching-learning process and the soundness of the examination system will largely determine the soundness of the rest. But the system at the college level mostly tests the memory power of the learner.

The "Testing" given in the syllabus (Appendix 14) says that 'Question papers are to be set in such a way as to make the students depend more and more on the prescribed text-books! But the question paper (See Appendix 14b) allots 50% of marks for essays which the learner usually reproduces from memory; and these essays can be got and memorized from the bazaar notes.

1.5.5 The Mental Status of a College Student

One of the difficulties faced by the teacher at the college level is that his students are past the age when languages can be easily learnt.

1) The school boy simply accepts English as something to be learnt, but the college entrant may have his own opinions on the subject, and this may influence his learning.
2) The school boy’s needs for English are likely to be of the most general kind, but at the college level they become more specific; and the interest of the adolescent college entrant are more difficult to predict and satisfy.

3) Very often the text used for teaching English at college level has a readership of a much lower mental age -- this is reflected in the choice of topics.

4) The class room techniques used to teach language skills are not suitable to the college students; for him, language learning should be more challenging than just carrying out repetitive tasks.

1.5.6 Variations in the Use/Position of English in India

Variations in the objective of teaching English also affect the teaching of English in India in general and in colleges in particular.

Many extreme views on the purpose of teaching English prevailed in India:

(i) Lord Mecaulay propagated English with the view that English could serve Indians more as a repository of culture than as a mode of communication. He thought that Indians would take English naturally and learn to use it in the same way as native speakers of the language; the approach of the learning and teaching of English was very nearly the same as that adopted in England.

That was why the study of English literature was emphasized as a valuable intellectual and cultural discipline in itself; learning the skills of the language for purposes of communication was never seen as the primary objective.
(ii) Raja Rammohan Roy propagated English making Indians believe that India’s progress and modernity are for ever linked to the English language.

These are definitely extreme views, and there are many more. But none of them is applicable in the present set up, due to the fact that in India, English is something more than a foreign language and something less than a second language. It has many more users and many more uses than a foreign language has; it is in reality less than a second language, because, the predominant role which English had in many area of communication has been taken over by other Indian languages.

Further, the strategy for learning second language is different from that adopted for learning foreign language: the learner of English as a foreign language need not be well versed in all the four skills; but the learner of English as a second language has to master all the four skills.

English is also not merely a library language as thought by many. Even if it be so, we can only minimize and not eliminate, the learning of all the skills except reading; but such is not the case; English occupies a rather unique position in India.

In fact, English is an ‘additional language’ (Ghosh, Sastri and Das 24) in India today. We must organize the teaching of English not as a first language but as an additional language. A multi-skill approach has to be adopted in teaching it. According to V.K. Gokul, English is to be studied as a world language:

The study of English as a world language is the new foundation on which we shall have to raise the edifice of English studies in India. Which we have to be aware of is importance as a world language, we
should also remember that we have now to study it as a second language, noting all the handicaps that such a study implies. (56)

Further English in India is recognized, among others, as the ‘language of wider communication’ and the ‘language of need filling’ (Mehrotra 163).

But whatever may be the position of English in India, today, for most people in India, only the communicative function of English is relevant. The cultural function is secondary; but it will not be wise to overlook this, since the English language has become an important element of contemporary Indian culture. Yet we are most concerned with learning the skills of the English language so as to be able to use it for communication. Though the study of English literature is not essential to the learning of these skills, if properly used, literature can be an aid in the acquisition of the language skills.

1.5.7. The Compulsion to Teach Language through Literature

In accordance with the above view, works of literature have been an integral part of English learning form the colonial period, to this day. Though they are minimized in number in the post independence period, they are not given up completely.

Even in the seventies, the college syllabus contained one whole book of ‘Paradise Lost’ for detailed study; a few short poems; a prose selection, a novel and even two Shakespearean plays. There were questions on appreciation also.
In the eighties and afterwards however, the literary topics were minimized in number. The English language syllabus contained just a few select prose pieces, a few short poems, two extensive readers and a play by Shakespeare or a modern play. There were appreciation questions also, but not very challenging.

Only in the recent years, communicative competence came to be stressed on. Questions dealing with the communicative skills have been included. Letter writing, dialogue writing, responding to an advertisement, note making, interview, curriculum vitae are included in the question papers along with appreciation questions. The text books, of course, continue to carry literary works.

The college syllabus has a distinct literary bias, with the intention of exposing the students to samples of the best English, so as to improve and enrich their ability to use the language.

1.5.8. Conclusion:

Thus the syllabus makers have included literature in the language text book; the English lecturer has no control over it. He has no other option except to teach those literary topics and at the same time to impart language skills to the learners.

The skills of language grow most efficiently when the learner is able to practise them actively, but even passive exposure to language has some value. The literary texts as a language teaching device cannot form the only basis for a language teaching programme, but a place should be found for them. So little is known of the processes by which human beings learn languages and it is wrong to exclude from the teaching system any ‘method’ which might assist in the learning of language. If
teaching literature could assist in the learning of language, it is wrong to exclude it from the teaching system.

Where literature has failed in assisting the learning of language, it is at least partly because people have lost sight of the fact that literature is language before it is anything else.

1.6 Strategies and Techniques Used at Present and How to Improve on Them

a) The text book: At present, the text book with its literary works, is the only tool the teacher has and the only method at is disposal. The teacher has so little insight into the nature of language learning and teaching that he is content with merely taking up the book and teaching it from cover to cover. But we know that this manner of ‘teaching a text book’ does not result in mastering language skills. The college teacher is to use the text book in class in such a way as to give his students the opportunity to practise and perfect those skills.

b) Student involvement: The objective is to get our students to use English to communicate. To achieve this objective, the learning of English has to be made much more of a two-way process in which the students participate as actively as the teacher himself. Mere listening on the part of learners is not good enough, and this makes a demand on the teacher.

c) Teacher involvement: First of all the teacher must develop certain ‘class room skills’ to be able to communicate effectively with his students.

The technique of lecturing is a common tool of dubious or, at most, limited value. Real communication is achieved by two (or more)
parties and the college teacher has to train his students not just to answer question but also to ask them, to comment, to discuss, and to argue. (Ghosh, Sastri, and Das 56)

Secondly the teacher should see that communication is sustained and results in acquiring language skills; for this the teacher needs the professional skill to transmit the language skills to his students.

d) The absence of the will to reform: Teaching techniques based on sound principles make up for a poor curriculum, unsuitable text book and examinations. Today every element in language teaching system cries out for reform—a reform in classroom teaching. On the other hand the college teacher complains that he cannot do anything unless the syllabus, the texts and the examination are improved. This crisis cannot be allowed to continue; the teacher must have the will to do something to change this for the benefit of the students.

e) The flaw in the system: The general feeling is that much of the time and effort involved in the teaching of English result in 'wastage'; but the flaw is in the system and not in the learner.

To change this situation, the teacher must make the learners work. Learners have become so accustomed to not working, to merely watching his lecturer ‘perform’ that at first they are likely to resent any attempt at making them work.

f) The examination. In India teaching serves only one purpose— the passing of examinations. This is regrettable, but the clever teacher can make use of the motivating power that examinations may provide in order to do some useful teaching.
The teacher should see that the task for the learner should be more and more challenging and the help given is less direct, until it is withdrawn altogether.

f) The technique: “Any technique which produces the desired results is good, and there can always be more ways than one of doing a thing” (Ghosh, Sastri and Das 58). But, even a successful technique may lead to boredom and fatigue if used constantly. Classroom teaching must not become a ritual to be observed at all costs. It must be imaginative, creative and flexible. It should be a blend of different approaches. Variety of techniques is an integral part of methodology.

g) Lecturing: Though student activity is emphasized, there is no objection to the use of lecturing if the situation requires it; it may serve as a relief from normal routine; it is useful for imparting information, it may serve as a shortcut when learning is slow; but it must be used judiciously and in small proportions.

The type of technique, alternative to lecturing, will arise out of the content that is being taught. The present syllabus combines ‘literature’ with ‘language’ in different proportions. But the teacher must be able to squeeze out some relevant skill from every component of the course; for, the lesson may begin with some activity by the class or with some activity by the teacher. On the whole, the teacher should do less of the talking and make his students do more of it; thus learning becomes a process of discovery, with the teacher only showing the way to be followed. Presentation must be followed by exercises.

h) Large classes: At present the college courses are so overloaded with prescribed texts and the classroom so overcrowded with learners of different entry
behaviours that the teacher finds no time for providing practice in language skills. He is expected by his students to read the text aloud to them, paraphrase, annotate, gloss and then dictate notes for the examination; the syllabus does not provide for practice in listening and reading, and these skills are not tested in the examinations.

By a proper planning and by a suitable re-arrangement of the class, this can be overcome. In large classes, opportunities for listening and reading can be found in peer groups; practice of the active skills – speaking and writing, can certainly be done more effectively in groups; this also promotes debate and discussion and induces the learners to talk freely in English; correction of pronunciation and grammar can also come from the groups themselves.

When students are asked to collaborate in some activity, they become more alert, possibly because of the element of competition; ideas flow readily and there is less shyness and inhibition. Jean Forrester has also explained the benefits of group works in her Teaching without Lecturing.

i) Classroom arrangement: The present classroom arrangement – students sitting facing the lecturer is not conducive to any kind of student participation and group activity. There must be a less formal kind of classroom arrangement; students should be free to arrange themselves in small groups for discussion.

j) Poetry in the Language Class: Literature in general and poetry in particular causes discomfort both to the teacher and the learner in the language class. Section 1.5.7 dealt with the necessity to teach language throughly literature. The place of poetry in English language class is established (see 2.4) in spite of the attacks against teaching it (see 2.5). Yet there is a general lack of love of poetry; the traditional
lecture method, and even other teaching strategies have transferred poetry into a ‘content – subject’ (see 2.9). The syllabus prescribed and the evaluation system also do not promote communication skill through poetry teaching. An alternative strategy which might involve the learner fully, through team work, and discussion has because the need of the hour.

1.6.1 Summary

Strategies and techniques available now are inadequate to promote communication skill. What is needed is the will to reform in the hearts of the curriculum designers, teachers and learners.

1.7 Hypothesis:

Communication is the major skill to be acquired in language teaching; but literature forms a major part of the present day’s syllabus, especially at the college level; the teacher has to identify some language skills in every literary topic that is prescribed, and he has no option to set aside literature; he is expected to deal with large language classes and help his students to pass in the examination. But he has at least the option to choose whichever method is interesting and suitable to fulfil the above purposes.

Literature can be taught (at least for the purpose of facing the examination) by lecture method; the teacher can paraphrase and dictate notes which the learner can reproduce in the examination; the appreciation questions of the present time, which do not demand any critical thinking can also be tackled in this way. But has the learner
been enabled to pick up any of the four language skills? Has he gained communicative competence? No concrete answer is possible.

The college teacher should think of a method of teaching literature, which will ensure maximum student-involvement and also fulfils the needs of the learner. This is to approach a piece of literature, especially poetry, not through the traditional lecture method, but through dialogues and discussions; not following the same technique but a variety of techniques each adjudged by the teacher suitable to the poem in hand; or at times a judicial mixture of a few techniques to remove the drudgery of the classroom teaching; and this will help the learner to do well in the examination also. The Oblique Method of teaching poetry discussed in Chapter III fulfils the above requirements. Student involvement and discussion are its integral parts.

This dissertation hypothesises that the Oblique Method of teaching poetry helps learners not only to develop appreciation skills but also communication skills in the situation prevailing in colleges, today.

1.8 Verifying the Hypothesis

This dissertation is the result of the researcher's interest in the oblique method drawn by a casual attention to it in a book and subsequently attempting it in the class of undergraduate students in his own college. The results were encouraging and interesting. Having become convinced of the outcome, he sought to test whether these would prove to be useful to other sets of learners of social and physical sciences belonging to the same tertiary level and fresh from school.
The researcher's use of the Oblique Method in teaching poetry was preceded and followed by a test; the post-test showed an improved performance revealing the effectiveness and feasibility of the hypothesis. The nature of the outcome is shown in chapter VI.

1.9 Conclusion

A historical perspective of the English teaching methods and the contents taught, reveal these: (1) There is no all time finality about the content and the method of teaching a language. During some successive periods of time the content has been kept constant but the methods have varied and vice versa. (2) There has always been an urge for revival with the aim of making learning easier and more effective. The teacher of English in India today experiences a lack of freedom in choosing the content. The syllabus is fixed; the evaluation system is fixed. But he can vary the method of teaching; he can find a method alternative to the traditional lecture method.

The challenge and opportunity today is to avoid dogma and rigidity, to indulge in consideration of priorities and to root all new strategies in realities of the present situation.

In Howatt and David Abercrombie's translation of Wilheln Vietor's *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!* (language teaching must start afresh!), we find Vietor commenting quite aptly and vehemently on the system of teaching language:

For six or even nine years they have eaten husks, and never tasted a single grain. Goethe warned against an education that 'points to the
goal instead of enjoying the path towards it'. How much worse, then, an education that does not even have a goal to point to! (Howatt 358)

Not being satisfied with this observation, Vietor goes further and urges the language teachers to take up this challenge:

Let language teachers make a start! Let them show how half-an-acre, well-tilled and tended, can prove more fertile than a whole one over which handfuls of seeds have been scattered indiscriminately .... And afterwards, as a reward, take the children out into the woods and on to the sports field. You will find a sure welcome and will not come away empty-handed. Perhaps you may then discover that it has been worthwhile to sacrifice a couple of ancient and harmful prejudices in return for the gratitude of the children for even the smallest acts of affection and kindness that they so richly deserve. (Howatt 361-2)

The various sections of this chapter show that English language teaching in India has been going on, all these years, without any set goal. Language teaching must start afresh and then it will be, assuredly, a rewarding experience to teachers. Chapter II focuses on teaching poetry which is also a part and parcel of language teaching.