CHAPTER III

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

A perusal of the related literature reveals that a number of factors contribute to individual differences in language acquisition. The prevalence of individual differences in the acquisition of language skills is on the increase today. Most often the human differences are referred to as learning disabilities. Generally, neurological dysfunction is presumed as the primary cause of learning disability. However, the view that learning disabilities are phenomena developed by social contexts or circumstances is associated with the assumption that socio-economic conditions and environmental factors such as malnutrition, abusive and chaotic environments, poor parenting and poor teaching at home or school can result in emotional and behavioral disorders which might cause learning difficulties. Since academic and social learning are interrelated, poor social skills in conjunction with inadequate teaching and poor academic performance hamper the individual's social and personal development. Problems emerging out of these factors may exhibit a disorder in one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. Any deficiency in the acquisition of language skills would lead to differential success and limited language proficiency would also affect the total academic progress, as language skills form the basis of education.

The complexity of human communication makes language teaching one of the greatest challenges in education. Learning a language is so different from learning anything else, because language learning process is affected by many contextual, affective and interpersonal factors, each other's background and knowledge, their learning goals, approaches, and styles as well as those of the course and other variables. Today, however, the demand for effective language acquisition and teaching has increased as the present day students, particularly
in professional courses, find themselves involved in a variety of language learning activities to meet the global competition and challenging situations.

Language, with its elaborate symbolic values, has a number of functions to do. The most basic and pervasive of all such functions is communication. Another important function of language is aesthetic expression. Language and communication have come to be regarded as more or less synonymous because aspects of communication other than language in society are most significant as compared to what language does in society. Language must have, for all reasons, originated in human society as a means of communication as developed from most primitive modes of communication. All other functions that we may conceive of with reference to language have been realized only later in the history of man, such as the use of language for man’s creative and aesthetic expression (Mukalel, 1998).

Students need opportunities to develop the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) by being exposed to situations where the emphasis should be on using their valuable resources for communicating meaning as efficiently and economically as possible. Therefore, the language skills should be taught as a process or in a developmental sequence, to enable the learners to acquire sufficient proficiency both in the spoken and written modes on completion of their secondary education. Learners should be involved in each stage of the language tasks, so that they learn by listening, speaking, reading and writing. The learner’s communicative or language ability involves

- knowledge of the linguistic structures,
- knowledge of the communicative system,
- skills and strategies for using language to communicate meaning in concrete situations and
- ability to vary the use of language forms according to different social circumstances.
To learn a language is, no doubt, to communicate with others in that language and to develop the learner’s communicative ability is a necessary goal of teaching and learning process.

The communicative function of language has come to be called communicative competence. Communicative competence is the built-in language ability of the individual that makes him capable of communicating effectively to others using communicative strategies. Language consists of not only the structural components such as sounds, grammar and lexis but also a set of strategies or devices that help the speaker carry out interpersonal communication with optimum efficiency in a given communicative context. Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is produced in all its concreteness as an event, what we shall call the communicative act. All communicative events (acts) take place in given communicative contexts which are in fact social contexts of one kind or the other.

Language, therefore, has grammatical forms and functions and meanings which cater not only to the communicative needs of man but also serve other purposes. Language is not just a communication tool as the type of language we use both in spoken and written modes reflects our perception and behavior. In other words, effective use of language becomes more difficult because of individual differences and uniqueness.

The goals of teaching language, therefore, should consider these perspectives of the communicative dimensions of language in general and English as a second language in particular. Although all aspects of English as a language are in one way or other important to the learner in the classroom, these communicative dimensions of English language need precedence over all the others. The learners should be exposed to that kind of English which helps create a communicative event or function satisfactorily. The learner should have practice in the communicative use of language to acquire those aspects of English language that would help him carry out interactions with considerable
economy and ease both at social and organizational contexts. The need for right word choice and linguistic expressions for the right occasion has become essential for conveying information and intentions. All these aspects of the communicative dimensions are relevant to classroom teaching.

3.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

The tremendous growth in the field of Science and Technology has resulted in the introduction of a number of new courses at the tertiary level of education. Such courses have developed interest in the teaching and learning process in higher education. In the education system, higher education is meant for acquiring knowledge in the areas of specialization and developing professional competence.

Developments in knowledge lead to demand for students with a broad background and ability to use language to receive, convey, understand, and write effectively the information associated with their specialist studies. Today in almost all professions, individuals are expected to interact with specialists in other disciplines and to cooperate to work in teams. Cooperation demands skill in communication. Hence, there is a need to promote the language skills, the most essential of all the intellectual competencies. Without the ability to use language effectively and efficiently, an individual in a society is seriously handicapped in everyday life (Hallahan et. al., 1994). In view of these demanding requirements, language teaching and learning has gained greater significance and interest at higher education, particularly in professional education where the needs and aims of learning are clearly defined.

3.2 METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING ENGLISH

Several changes have been observed in the methodology and goals of teaching English language over the years. In language teaching, an approach deals with the nature of language teaching and learning, while method is an
overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, and therefore is procedural. The three theoretical views, the structural, the functional, and the interactional provide the theoretical framework which may motivate a particular teaching method. The structural view considers language as a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning. The functional view emphasizes the semantic and communicative dimension rather than the grammatical features and language functions as a vehicle for the expression of meaning. The interactional view sees language as a tool for realizing interpersonal relations and performing social transactions.

The situational language teaching methodology is based on structuralism focusing speech and knowledge of structures which must be linked to situations. This methodology advocates the behaviourist habit-learning theory and the objectives of this method are to develop the four basic skills through structure and to achieve accuracy.

The audio-lingual method changed language teaching from an art to a science which would enable the learners to achieve effective and efficient language skills. The underlying theory of language is structural linguistics which focuses speech. The theory of learning, based on behavioral psychology, stresses reinforcement as a vital element and the primary objective is to develop oral proficiency.

In view of the importance of spoken communication and interest in modern language for communication, communicative language teaching has been accepted as the most relevant teaching methodology in the classroom. With a rich, somewhat eclectic theoretical base, communicative language teaching aims to develop the learners’ communicative competence. Learning a second language is viewed as acquiring the linguistic means to perform different functions. Hence, the method of teaching English has already moved from structural to functional and communicative uses at higher levels. Teaching
material includes functional communication activities to develop grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

Learners should be involved in each stage of the language tasks to acquire sufficient communicative competence, the built-in language ability to communicate effectively using appropriate communicative strategies.

3.3 GOALS OF TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Today, in most Indian schools at the primary and secondary levels, the aims of learning English language are related to general education and more general in nature. The learners at these levels are taught how the syntactic and lexical rules of English operate, but not the communicative use of language. The general English instruction provided at schools may be effective in teaching English usage with regard to the syntactic rules but does not help the learner in the understanding of how these rules are related to language use for communicative purposes. The teaching of English language is treated like teaching any other subject. The type of English language instruction provided at schools has proved to be inadequate to meet the requirements at tertiary level.

Language teaching at higher levels is clearly done for a utilitarian purpose as the needs have become very specific and precise. Language functions as a means of furthering their specialist education and performing a social role. The urge to communicate is a force that motivates the learners at higher levels to develop their pragmatic competence, the social use of language.

The goals of teaching English language, therefore, should consider the perspectives of the communicative dimensions of language in the classroom from the secondary levels.

3.4 ROLE OF LISTENING SKILLS

Listening skills plays a significant role in communication and in language learning. (Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Rost, 1990; Dunkel, 1991 and
Rubin, 1994). Listening assumes increased importance in the instructional process because it is not just a skill area in language performance but functions as a channel for acquisition of knowledge. Though developing all the basic skills is essential, listening, the most frequently used, is the first language art that a learner develops and is an integral part of communicative competence.

Listening is the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli (Wolvin and Coakley, 1985). The process of listening, therefore, includes attending, processing information and having enough knowledge of vocabulary and content to put the message into a meaningful form. Active and effective listening requires careful hearing and understanding of the message. Hearing is a psycho-physical process, while listening is an active part of the communicative process. Listening as a skill is to be taught at early stages because a child learns to speak fluently the language he learns irrespective of his race or nationality, whereas an adult learns with fixed habits of speech and listening. Listening is more than hearing. In a given context two listeners, with the same capacity to hear, receive widely different messages. Ross (1966) found that good listeners rated higher than poor listeners on intelligence, reading, socioeconomic status and achievement (as cited in Psychology in Teaching Reading, p.141, Dechant and Smith, 1977). It has also been stated that a significant deficiency in auditory discrimination is observed in economically disadvantaged preschool children (Clark and Richards, 1966).

3.5 DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS

Developing listening skills in the instructional process is essential as listening ability is closely related to proficiency in academic areas. The listening habits of learners have to be enhanced by developing a natural listening ability to handle new information with due to attention to speech sounds, word stress, pauses and semantic changes and to guess and justify information.
Listening in language teaching has also become significant these days as the spoken language has become the most important source and means of foreign language learning, and hence accuracy of perception and clarity of auditory memory are important focal language skills. Conaway's (1982) review of many studies showed that deficient listening skills were a stronger factor in college failure than were poor reading skills and low academic aptitude. Listening ability is basic to the learning of reading. A review of literature on this point states that listening has a positive effect on reading achievement (Hollingsworth, 1964). Reading and listening involve the reception of ideas from others, therefore, considered as the receptive skills. While listening demands auditory memory and understanding, reading calls for visual memory and comprehension.

Acquiring listening skills involves three phases – leveling, sharpening, and assimilation. At the first stage, the mind is free and open for any flow of information and then it screens the material. At the second level, sharpening of verbal inputs by the mental filters of the individuals occurs and then the listeners assimilate the needed information. These stages, however, are dependent on the mental make up of the receiver.

Listening is often undermined by distractions arising from the environment, the learner, and the speaker. Mostly distractions arise from within the listener. There are a number of causative factors for the distractions. Lack of attention and interest is a significant problem in listening. Scovel (1991) emphasized the importance of attention and he considered it as central to the entire process of second language acquisition and as the neuropsychological mechanism it either promoted or prohibited acquisition. Attention can be increased by active intention and consciously looking for clues while listening. Ego, the basic communication block, will also prevent an individual from listening to the speaker. Lack of self-confidence and motivation, fear due to inattentive listening, preconceived ideas, the familiarity
of the trap, (previous knowledge of the topic) wandering mind (preoccupied with their own thoughts) and stress will have a negative impact on the process. Affective aspects such as these would influence the listening process and learners have a negative listening self concept (Joiner, 1986). The learners become anxious when they fail to handle listening tasks and anxiety increases when they think that they must understand every word they hear, and thus creates failure and fatigue.

The purposes of listening tasks vary and different listening tasks invoke different kinds of listening behaviors on the part of students. To become good listeners, learners need to use strategies to develop different listening behaviors. Listening strategies such as what they already know, scanning for background information and main idea and identifying specific information using context and structure clues can be used appropriately to sharpen and upgrade listening skills.

3.6 ROLE OF READING SKILLS

Reading as an educational activity is a complex process requiring very specialized skills on the part of the reader. Reading requires recognition and perception of language structures in order to comprehend both the surface and deep meaning which these structures communicate (Birkley, 1970). Expertise in reading, therefore, involves many competencies including decoding, word recognition, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and familiarity with the topic being read to comprehend the meaning. Comprehension includes the right association of meanings with word symbols, the evaluation of contextual meanings, and the organization of ideas as they read, the retention of these ideas and their use in some present or future activity.

A reader’s reaction to a printed word depends on his experience and how he views events and objects and this is known as perception. Perception is a personal thing which is influenced by affective aspects and past experience.
The emotive and physical state of an individual influences his perceptions and therefore meaning. Often, students with learning disabilities have negative perceptions of their own competence (Bryan, 1986). Reading, being a perceptual process, is likely to be influenced by the cultural experiences of the reader, his cognitive style, the purpose for reading and his level of experience with language itself. The ability to read involves recognition, understanding, reaction and integration. Integration is the heart of learning in reading. Any reading activity is complete only when the idea or concept that is read becomes assimilated (Gray, 1957).

Understanding a written text refers to the extraction of required information efficiently from it. Effective reading focuses economy, which includes comprehension and rate. Learners at higher levels are expected to read fast as they have to do a lot of independent study. However, reading speed depends on the nature of the material, purpose of the reading task, and the individual's level of reading ability which is influenced by a number of factors.

Deficits in the basic components of language – phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics – play a prominent role in the problems of students who have difficulty in learning to read. Reading involves decoding and comprehension. While decoding, the reader converts the printed letters and words into a more familiar spoken language. Effective decoding requires phonological competence and poor decoding skills would lead to reading difficulty. Liberman and Shankweiler (1991) stressed the importance of phonological skills. It has also been stated that dyslexic children with reading comprehension difficulties are deficient in oral syntax (Vogel, 1974).

Reading problems arising out of inadequate skills in syntax would lead to difficulty in identifying the relationship between words or groups of words in a sentence. The syntactic decoding is necessary for word recognition. Semantic decoding helps the learner to interpret the meaning of a message. Problems in reading comprehension may also be due to deficits in vocabulary and general
world knowledge. A limited vocabulary can hamper reasoning ability which contributes to the lower scores on comprehension tests (Ackerman, et. al., 1971). Besides, students with learning disabilities use reading strategies ineffectively and have problems in determining the underlying themes of materials.

In addition to these language deficits, the behavioral aspects of the learner influence his reading achievement. The behavior differences among learners result in varied personality dispositions. Though emotions are important for human development, maladjustive emotional development is believed to cause reading failure. A poor reader develops anxiety and dislike for reading. Anxiety develops the reading disability and prevents the learner from using his intellectual capacity. An individual's intellectual potential varies from others as it relies on his nature and nurture. Therefore, growth and development vary from one another and so also achievement in reading. Intelligence, the ability to learn and to apply what is learned, is an important determinant of reading readiness and general reading achievement.

An individual’s assessment of himself influences his learning process. The self-concept functions as an integrating force and this is different from one another. An inadequate self-image affects reading achievement and reading failure in turn increases emotional maladjustment. While some emotions enhance learning process, some hinder learning. Personal development and learning of reading are closely interrelated, and that each influences the other.

The success or failure of the reading process is also related to other factors such as motivation, attitudes and interests. Motivation aroused by external stimuli is essential to human learning and particularly reading instruction because habits are formed through reinforcement which satisfies a motivating condition. Attitudes and interests are closely related. Interest is a powerful factor that develops reading skills and promotes reading habit. Socio-
economic, cultural factors and social influences also contribute to the development of interests in reading.

Reading in science demands an orderly systematic approach including the ability to classify, categorize, understand and memorize. The ability to interpret facts and ideas, to identify main ideas, to organize ideas, to interpret graphs and charts, directions and to use them in experiments are some of the objectives of reading in content area. Any inadequacy in reading skills would distract the learners while they proceed with their reading act. Since reading and reading comprehension are highly related to academic progress, the development of reading skills and assessment of reading performance are essential.

3.7 ASSESSMENT OF LISTENING AND READING SKILLS

As a result of the significance of language acquisition for effective communication among learners, much research has been devoted to studying the ways in which a diverse set of factors affects language learning. Since the early 1970s, beginning with the work of Gardner and Lambert (1972), numerous empirical studies have shown significant correlations between affective factors and achievement. Most of these earlier studies, conducted at primary and secondary school level, suggested that factors such as socio-economic status, family and school environment, and the personality traits influence the learners’ attitude to learning and aspirations, and hence considered as vital determinants of language development.

Pedagogical variables such as learning styles, study habits, locus of control, learning approaches and learners’ effectiveness are also believed to influence language development. It is, therefore, incumbent upon language teachers to become sensitive to and aware of these learner differences that affect language skills. To meet the demands and aspirations of a particular learner group, the course content has to be restructured, refined and adopted to suit the communicative disorders or differences. Hence, it is imperative to
assess the language skills possessed by the learners and to find out the socio-pedagogical factors affecting language skills.

Assessment of performance has several purposes. It helps to screen and select several students who may have disability, and to identify and classify the type of disability. Most of the domains of performance are interrelated and that problems in one may be closely connected to problems in others. The assessment of the basic skills of language requires attention to cognition, socialization and the learning environment.

One of the primary goals of listening and reading instruction at the college level is to help learners develop into expert or more strategic listeners and readers. Therefore, expertise in listening and reading does not only include the many competencies but also demands the ability to use effective strategies to enhance their understanding and develop receptive skills.

Research on the behaviors of efficient readers and listeners has indicated that skilled learners use a number of strategies to decode and interpret the meaning. Integrating strategic reading and listening instruction requires advance planning on the part of the teachers. The activities for teaching as well as testing can be presented under three sections: pre-, while- and post- listening and reading sections. The need to preview, (become familiar with the vocabulary in use) understand relations within the sentence, predict and anticipate by finding an answer to a question and summarize the material may be focused.

The most common testing techniques of receptive skills are multiple choice questions, true or false items, identifying word meaning, matching vocabulary items and summary cloze (a summary of the reading passage with gaps for the learners to fill up choosing from the list of words).

Based on the above mentioned strategies and testing techniques for reading and listening skills, reading and listening tests were prepared to assess the language skills of the first year students of engineering colleges.
3.8 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Development of language skills and the process of growth and development are interdependent as language learning process is both a progressive experience and a progressive acquisition of skills. According to Dehant and Smith (1977), development is a function of both nature and nurture. The type of social, economical and educational background in which a learner is nurtured either facilitates or inhibits the development of language skills. The process of learning, thus, varies between individuals. No two learners are alike in any given situation. This fact leads to the grouping of language learners at any level as high, moderate, and low.

Factors such as higher parental education, occupational status and income influence the learners’ commitment to learning, increase his choice of school, college and courses and provide a comfortable home environment which is essential for effective learning process. It has been reported that unstable and disorganized home environment has a detrimental effect upon language learning and cognitive abilities. Moreover, the social environment in which many children are brought up alter the nature of verbal interaction which may have a significant impact on language learning and usage.

The two main social environments, family and college, contribute a lot to the development of cognitive abilities of the learners as well as their personality. Most of the earlier studies indicate that learners from upper socio-economic status enter school with more background knowledge and experience than those from the lower status. Adequate background knowledge and experience are important prerequisites for language learning. These two aspects also enable them to acquire language faster and utilize the benefits of classroom teaching at college level to develop confidence and increase motivation. On the other hand, a learner from an economically low status experiences a different social and educational background which influences his language development and personality. Therefore, personality combined with environment, can either
promote or hinder learners. A high achiever is always highly motivated to seek out more opportunities for communication because he is an extrovert with low anxiety level and high self-esteem. A low achiever tries to avoid opportunities that would help him learn and in his case the classroom climate inhibits his learning as he develops anxiety and becomes an introvert. Therefore, a study of these social factors is necessary to assess their influence on learning process.

Pedagogical factors refer to the teaching and learning principles and practices used in the classroom. The effectiveness of learning practices depends on learning approaches, styles, study habits, learners’ effectiveness and locus of control. However, in any language class there seems to be wide divergence in achievement level. The factors that contribute to learner variables are intelligence, language aptitude, inappropriate strategies that the learners adopt, improper study habits and styles and in particular, motivation and interest. It has been proved that learners who use strategies effectively while reading or listening are more successful in understanding. Study habits such as planning of work, reading and note taking, habits of concentration and college environment influence students’ performance. Motivation to learn in their own preferred learning style increases effectiveness. Locus of control, a relatively stable trait, assesses the individual’s beliefs about the factors that cause success or failure. A study of such pedagogical factors to assess their impact on language skills is necessary to ensure effective teaching and learning process.

3.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The goals of language learning at higher level have become more specific. The learners are expected to use their linguistic competence they have acquired during school days at different communicative situations both in their social and organizational roles. However, the performance of the learners when they enter college differs from one another. This may be due to the difference in the development of language skills which would have been caused by the
school environment, family background, the different syllabi followed in different schools and the learners' aptitude for learning. Since most of the earlier studies conducted in this area were at primary and secondary school level, the present study proposes to identify the variables that affect the language skills of the first year students of engineering colleges and to study their influence on language learning process.

3.10 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The utilitarian aspect of education should acquire some real importance at the advanced level of study where students prepare for a career and must, therefore, strive hard to achieve those study skills which would serve their purpose. Limited language proficiency would not help an otherwise successful learner to disseminate his subject knowledge. Hence, the ultimate purpose of language learning at higher levels is to develop communicative competence. Most of the studies conducted at different levels of education in the area of language learning indicate that achievement in language skills is dependent on a number of variables such as socio-economic status, home and college environment, personality factors and learning principles and practices.

Considering the vital role that language skills play in educational system and the importance of the socio-pedagogical factors that influence language development, the present study proposes to assess the language skills of the first year students of engineering colleges and to find out the influence of socio-pedagogical factors on language skills.