

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 LANGUAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MANKIND

In all the magnificent improvements and developments of mankind communication plays a vital role. To communicate with a fellow being man needs language. As a result of language, man has developed into a reasonable, thinking, civilized human being.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed tremendous changes after World War II. There was unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic fronts at the international level. Obviously this resulted in the demand for an international language for the sustained growth of mankind in all spheres. At this juncture English emerged as the unparalleled and most influential language.

As a result of the imperialistic policy of the British rulers, English began to develop all over the world. The rulers and missionaries spread the language for their own benefits and at the same time the manners and the lifestyle of the British also attracted the foreigners. Today, any progressive nation needs to maintain international cooperation and understanding and English stands as an unmatched language to meet this demand. English is the language of international communication today. English is also used as a Second or foreign Language throughout the world. There are millions of speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL) with varying degrees of

proficiency. The growth in English is remarkable as it is used throughout the world.

1.2 ENGLISH IN INDIA

Right from the nineteenth century the government has paid attention to the place of English in the educational system. In 1917, the Calcutta University Commission reported on the rapid decline in the academic standards in all subjects, especially English. It stressed the importance of the study of English as part of general education in India. Alam (1983) discusses some of the reasons reported by the commission for the deterioration in the quality of the teaching of English. The reasons reported by the Calcutta University Commission for the decline in the quality of English were

- a) lack of contact with teachers who spoke English as their mother-tongue,
- b) unsuitability of the lecture method and
- c) lack of systematic instruction.

After independence, the deterioration in the standards of teaching and learning English was taken note of and a number of commissions were set up to study the situation.

1.2.1 Various Commissions and their Suggestions

The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948) also known as the University Education Commission (1949) recommended that English should be studied in high schools and in the universities so that Indians might have the additional edge over people from other countries when seeking jobs in the western world.

The Kunzuru Committee in 1955 stressed the use of special and innovative methods by the teacher in English Language Teaching (ELT). The recommendation of the Official Language Commission in 1956 was on teaching English for comprehension rather than as a literary language. This would help the learners comprehend writings in the English language related to their special fields of study.

Quirk (1963) found the standards of English teaching deplorable in India and stressed the need for reform. The Kothari Commission also known as the Education Commission, in 1964, emphasized the role of English as a library language and a channel of internal communication. Since English is required to read and understand books at the tertiary level, the commission recommended English as the medium of instruction for higher education in universities.

The 1964-66 Education commission stated that the situation in higher education, in India, was unsatisfactory and even alarming. The rapid expansion has resulted in lowering the quality of education. Thereafter, the Government of India adopted the resolution on National Policy on Education in 1968 based on the report of the Kothari Commission. Accordingly English was included in the three-language formula adopted by the Government. This means that the student should learn the mother-tongue, the national language and English. The studying of English was stressed keeping in view its importance especially in science and technology.

This discussion shows that the educational policies of the various commissions stressed the need and the importance of teaching English even from the primary level.

1.3 TWENTYFIRST CENTURY

In the twentyfirst century, with the liberalization of the Indian economy there was a radical change in the job market. Many multinational companies invested in India. Knowledge of English assured placements and became the criterion for success at the tertiary level. English became the medium of instruction at the higher educational level, particularly in professional courses like law, medicine, and engineering, considering the trend in global job opportunities. There came a whole new generation of language users in India. They were influenced by the culture of the west. Everyone realized the importance of English as it gave them a social lift.

This development exerted pressure on language teachers to deliver need-based courses to all learners to suit their appropriate demands, which reformed and restructured the entire language teaching system

1.4 ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL IN INDIA

In India up to the school level there are two streams of learning -

- 1) one in which a student is taught all the subjects through English,
- 2) the other where English is taught only in the language classes, as in a mother-tongue medium school.

The child who learns through the former method is exposed to English, right from the age of three, in all the classes. The child who is taught through the latter method is exposed to the language only in the English classroom. In a mother-tongue medium school the language is learnt using the methodology of rote-memory. The students learn through 'notes' popularly

known as 'guides'. At times the teacher has to use the vernacular to teach the English language.

The educational policies of the various commissions focused on reform; however, implementing these policy decisions in the Indian classrooms require a lot of effort and will power from the teacher.

1.5 EDUCATION AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

In India, English is the medium of instruction at the tertiary level. Though students have the choice to study in their mother-tongues at school, at the tertiary level, the medium of instruction is only English. However in arts and science colleges students are given the option of writing the examinations in their mother-tongue. This option is not available to all students of professional colleges.

In the professional colleges, at the tertiary level, fluency in English is not considered as one of the criteria for admission. Proficiency in science and mathematics is taken into account for admission into a professional college. However knowledge of English is necessary for two major reasons.

- a) English is the only medium of instruction. The student needs English to understand engineering concepts.
- b) If a student needs to keep abreast of the growing world knowledge especially in science and technology, he needs English.

In this competitive world, these students from the mother-tongue medium schools face problems and lose out in the long run. It is for the academicians to intervene and take a decisive step. Education demands highly conscious and developed teachers to accommodate individual differences in

the classroom. The education system should augment a curriculum which is specific to the slow learner. Walqui (2000, p3) in “Contextual Factors in Second Language Acquisition” talks about curriculum for diverse needs.

A basic educational principle is that new learning should be based on prior experiences and existing skills. Although this principle is known and generally agreed upon by educators, in practice it is often overshadowed by the administrative convenience of the linear curriculum and the single text book. Homogeneous curricula and materials are problematic enough if all learners are from a single language and cultural background, but they are indefensible given the great diversity in today’s classrooms. Such diversity requires a different conception of curricula and a different approach to materials. Differentiation and individualization are not a luxury in this context: They are a necessity.

This concept sounds interesting but it is not feasible in a country like India because of the problem of heterogeneity. So it is in the hands of the teacher to help the limited proficiency students become proficient in the language and in turn taste success in life.

1.6 ENGLISH AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

The need and the seriousness of teaching English at the tertiary level is to be understood to justify the importance of this research study. The number of users of English world wide surges toward a probable two billion or more (Crystal 1985); but those for whom it is the mother-tongue fall to a fifth or less of this total.

The bulk of professional institutions in India offer courses through the English medium. They are much sought after as they offer better employment opportunities. Those who have studied in English medium schools have better chances of performing well in these institutions. Students from mother-tongue schools face the difficulty of switching over to a new medium. The method of learning adopted by these students at schools is the rote-method. But this method of learning does not help them at the tertiary level.

These students are unfavorably affected and cannot shine and they miss the opportunity of getting admission for post graduate courses. These students do not suffer from any inherent deficits. In mother-tongue medium schools, students get an opportunity to use English only in the language classroom. In college, students from mother-tongue medium schools not only have to learn their subjects in English but also show their learning through the language. This makes it exceedingly difficult for them.

Their underachievement in English and as a result in the other subjects is due to several problems, some of these problems are present in the classroom and some outside of it as well. These problems pose a hindrance to attend to the special wants and needs of these students.

1.7 PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

English language teaching at the tertiary level is riddled with many practical difficulties. To name a few

- a) Strength of the class
- b) Outdated syllabus
- c) Culturally unsuited methodology

- d) Problem of heterogeneity
- e) Incompetent teachers
- f) Demotivated students
- g) Unaccommodating management
- h) Demanding industry

a) Strength of the class

The strength of the class in a professional institution is more than 60. Even in leading technical institutions the maximum strength is 70. The student teacher ratio is 1: 60. In a three seater bench in the classroom, four to five students are asked to adjust. The teacher misses the chance to pay individual attention to every student in the class.

b) Outdated syllabus

With a syllabus unrevised for years together, the teacher and the learner show no interest in the classroom sessions. The syllabus is not updated even when dealing with technical concepts. Recent developments and advancements in science and technology do not form a part of the syllabus, though the syllabus is called a technical syllabus.

c) Culturally unsuited methodology

The content of the syllabus mostly matches with the culture of the west. Students from diverse backgrounds in the Indian context cannot identify themselves culturally with the content of the syllabus.

d) Problem of heterogeneity

As a result of the difference in the Indian system of education between the higher education level and the tertiary level, the classroom at the

tertiary level is a heterogeneous crowd. Students come from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds. The teacher has to adopt different teaching techniques to suit the needs of different students. For this the teacher has to be competent enough to tackle the situation. No uniform method of teaching can be applicable in the tertiary Indian English classroom.

e) Incompetent teachers

At times the language teachers are not competent enough to meet the demands of the students. Their only target is to finish the syllabus on time. They complete the syllabus, sacrificing the needs and demands of the students. The burden placed on these teachers is great if they have to handle a heterogeneous group of students. Teachers may themselves do not have the required proficiency in the language and therefore are not competent to help students with their problems in English.

f) Demotivated students

Students who come from mother-tongue medium schools become highly demotivated when they face the change in the method of teaching and learning, at the tertiary level. This new environment makes them disinterested in learning though they are students with a sound knowledge of the technical concepts. If it is an engineering course, then these students are even more taken back when they realize that they have to study via English.

g) Unaccommodating management

The management is only interested in a greater number of university rank holders and a larger number of students to be placed in reputed companies. Instead of spending more time with limited proficiency students, the teacher feels he/she can devote his/her time in helping the class

topper get a university rank. With this as the goal the teacher has little time or practically no time for the students from the mother-tongue medium schools.

h) Demanding industry

The job market in which the student should sell himself is a highly competitive one. If the student has not qualified in terms of English, he misses the opportunity to get a job. The students from the mother-tongue medium schools need to manage and somehow cope with the demands of the industry.

Due to the above discussed issues the suggestions of the various commissions remained only as policies without any implementation.

1.8 SUGGESTIONS TO OVERCOME THE PROBLEMS

If these problems are to be overcome the language teacher should first understand how language is learnt and how as a second language teacher he can aid the process of learning. The following section discusses these concepts.

(a) A View of Language Learning

A conception of language learning is an essential component of a language teaching theory. Second language teachers are in a good position to observe patterns of language learning and to appreciate intuitively the characteristics of poor and good learners and to surmise why some students progress and others run into difficulties. An ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher necessarily needs to recognize the possible relationships between learning outcomes, the learning process, the learning characteristics, the condition of learning, and the social and linguistic context in which learning occurs.

(b) A View of Second Language Teaching

Second Language Teaching (SLT), expanding upon a definition of teaching by Gage (1978) consists of any activity on the part of one person intended to facilitate the language learning of another person. This language is not the native language of the person who is learning or sometimes not the native language of both the persons involved. In a country like India English is not the native language of both the persons involved in second language teaching.

From Gage's definition good teaching is any activity which facilitates learning while bad teaching is any activity which fails to facilitate learning. The essence of second language teaching consists of three interrelated and interdependent factors.

- 1) the teacher
- 2) an activity designed to facilitate the learning of another language
- 3) the learner

The conventional ways of carrying out the functions of a teacher may vary from one educational setting to another. The physical environment that is the classroom, the syllabus, the curriculum, the methods and materials used for teaching, and the methodology adopted for teaching are bound to change. The three factors of teaching are unlikely to change.

Out of the three factors involved, the teacher has to play a more responsible role. Prior to the 1970's the "methods" of language teaching ruled supreme. The curriculum-centered course and the teacher-centered course did not cater to the diverse needs of the students. Only after the 1970's did the learner-centered instruction in second language teaching come to the

forefront. With this the teacher exercised more freedom of choice along with the obligation to use that freedom. The teacher must take into consideration the specific educational setting and the specific students before deciding upon the pedagogical strategies.

McKim and Lester (1972, p86) have rightly said “only a teacher can develop a learner-centered classroom”. Only the second language teacher can facilitate the when, where, and how of learning the second language – or can single handedly destroy the learning process. The responsibility of a second language learner is great in this “age of the learner”. The power lies in the teacher to kindle the responsibility in the learner and to bring a change in the lives of the learners.

A second language teacher, to be effective, needs to understand more clearly the discrepancy between the knowledge of the second language that the student brings with him to the language learning situation and the demands imposed by the teacher, the text and the demands placed by the examination system.

(c) Facilitating Second Language Learning

In the Indian classroom, at the tertiary level, there are two major student groups whose needs must be considered. They are the students who are of limited English proficiency and the students who can and have managed to learn English along with their first languages. Both these groups bring different needs and different resources to any classroom but for both of them the goal of language learning is similar. The goal is attaining proficiency in English. The curriculum and the classroom teaching should be designed in such a way that students from these two groups have the opportunity to develop an ability to understand, speak, read and write English.

The very diverse needs of our students have to be first acknowledged and then probed in detail before developing a set of teaching options that will provide every student the opportunity to acquire proficiency in English. Optimal language learning environments can be (and have been) created by teachers in classrooms.

Teaching therefore becomes an active thinking and decision-making process in which the teacher is constantly assessing what students already know, what they need to know, and how to provide for successful learning. This requires that teachers not only be good managers but also have an extensive knowledge base about their subject and about teaching and learning strategies. In the classroom, teachers act as models and demonstrate mental processes and language strategies by thinking aloud to their students. They can also act as mediators by helping students use strategies to understand and organize information and by showing them how to become autonomous learners.

In the next section a discussion on the importance of the writing skill at the tertiary level is presented.

1.9 WRITING SKILLS

The task of writing is a challenging one. It involves planning, drafting, revising, and restructuring to get the final draft. The final draft of our writing will fill us with a sense of achievement. Saraswathi (2004, pp92-93) remarks,

... writing is a mysterious skill which no one has mastered fully as yet. Learning to write is a life long process and there is always room for improvement, however well one may

write.... writing involves organization which is essential to achieve coherence in what one says.

1.9.1 Importance of Writing at the Tertiary Level

As the present study is aimed at studying the role of strategy instruction in helping students from mother-tongue medium schools develop their writing skills, the following points elaborate on the importance of writing at the tertiary level especially for students in engineering colleges. Students in the engineering colleges need to develop their writing skills as they need to prove their competency in writing for the following reasons.

- Students need to take their periodicals and end-semester examinations in writing. Internal marks are awarded to the students based on their performance in their periodical examinations. The external marks are awarded after an external valuation in their end-semester examinations. Unless and until a student is able to convey the scientific concepts clearly through writing he cannot score better marks.
- Certain topics in the subjects are assigned as assignments for the students. For each subject the students have to write three to four assignments in a single semester. These assignments are evaluated for the internal marks awarded in the particular subject. The assignment goes to prove the students' understanding of the subject and their ability to express their understanding in writing. Original assignments written by the students stand above the assignments that are copied from the study materials or guides.

- As part of the engineering syllabus students of all branches are expected to go for an industrial training for a period of 30 days during their vacation. When they finish the training and come back to college, they are asked to submit a report to the head of the department on the training that they had undergone in the industry. If the various phases of the training are not worded clearly then the head of the department cannot be convinced of the training, though it is one of the best trainings that the student has undergone.
- Students need to write many formal letters during the course of the study. They need to write letters to the industries and companies seeking permission for the industrial training. If the information is not clear in writing, permission may be denied. At the end of the pre-final year they have to write letters of application to various companies seeking employment.
- During the course of the B.E, B.Tech program the students have to do a project in the eighth semester in lieu of an elective paper. The best projects are awarded and these projects are one of the deciding factors for students getting placed in reputed companies. For the projects, the students have to submit a project proposal to the project supervisor, initially. Then a report on the progress of the project, a review on the project has to be submitted periodically to the project supervisor. In addition to this the students are also required to do mini projects.
- Students need to present technical papers in inter-college and intra-college technical symposiums. These paper presentations showcase their talents and also give them the confidence to

present technical papers in national and international conferences, which will add weightage to their curriculum vitae.

- When students seek admissions in foreign universities for their post graduate studies they have to write a statement of purpose (SOP) which is to be sent along with the application. This statement should explain their academic strengths, reason for choosing the university for post graduation, reason for choosing the post graduation course, and should also tell something about them. In reality students flock to the department of English to get their SOP to be written or corrected.

The above discussed list may change depending on the teacher, subject, and revisions made in a syllabus. The above list justifies that if a student needs to get better grades and excel he has to improve his writing skills. To really help a student will be to teach him to employ better methods to improvise his writing skills.

1.10 HYPOTHESIS

All adult ESL learners irrespective of whether they come from an English medium or a mother-tongue medium school use strategies to effectively communicate (through speaking and writing) in English. Some of these strategies used by successful students (especially those coming from mother-tongue medium schools) can be universalized (taught) in the existing classroom set up, so that their not so successful peers can be helped to improve their communication skills in English, particularly writing.

1.11 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major focus of the study is on strategies and how they can be used to teach writing to students, who are severely handicapped so far as writing in English is concerned. The focus of the thesis is strategy instruction for effective learning of English.

(a) The Major Aim

The major aim of the study is to explore the possibility of using strategy instruction to enhance language learning, with specific reference to the development of the writing skills of LEP students.

(b) The Minor Aims

The minor aims of the study are given below.

- To investigate the extent to which students at the tertiary level are aware of and use strategies when writing in English.
- To study if successful tertiary learners use strategies.
- To make LEP students take greater responsibility for their learning by making them aware of strategies that they could use for effective learning of English.

1.12 PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To identify the range of learning strategies used by successful students from mother-tongue medium schools, at the tertiary level.

- 2) To determine if the strategies could be defined and organised within existing strategy classification frameworks.
- 3) To determine if these strategies could be taught to the less successful learners from mother-tongue medium schools.

1.13 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

To understand the scope of the study it is necessary to understand the following areas of discussion.

1.13.1 Aim of Learner Training

The language teachers, at the tertiary level, are aware that the language learners do not remember a word of the language, after spending many years in learning the language. This happens because the learners may not know how to adequately use the input that they are exposed to in class.

One major aim of learner training is to make sure that LEP students do not waste their valuable time in the language classroom, because they do not know how to go about their learning effectively.

1.13.2 Relevance of a Study on Strategy Training

The study of learning strategies holds considerable promise, both for language pedagogy and for explaining individual differences in second language learning. Successful learners of English differ from unsuccessful learners in terms of the ways they approach learning of the language.

The scope of this study is to help the less successful language learners by teaching them to use strategies. Individual learning differences

may be because of the varied use of strategies. Second language teachers can explore this strategy use to benefit less successful learners.

1.14 RESEARCH TOOL USED IN THE STUDY

To assess the use of language learning strategies by the students a strategy assessment tool was used in the study. A questionnaire was used for this purpose. The researcher used the modified version of the questionnaire adapted from Oxford (1990) (version 7.0) as a tool to collect data from the students (refer to Appendix 2).

The questionnaire was task independent. The questionnaire asked the students to report on their typical, general use of language learning strategies. The data collected served as a tool for the research study. The data was collected,

- to make students aware of language learning strategies.
- to show the students that they make use of language learning strategies in the language learning process.
- to study how often each student uses different kinds of strategies. This will make the student aware of the kind of strategies which he uses very often and the kind of strategies that he does not use, but could be used for effective learning of English.
- to study the kind of strategies which are used often by many students in the chosen group.
- to study the number of students who use often the different kinds of language learning strategies.

1.15 SUMMARY

The chapter has discussed the various roles the English language has played in the Indian Educational system. It traced the reports and recommendations of the various education commissions. The state of English language teaching at the school level and at the tertiary level is discussed. The chapter moves on to talk about the hypothesis, aims and objectives of the research. The need for a study on strategy training brings out the significance of this research study.

The research work outlines the ways that can enhance learners' abilities to write in a second language. It also aims to give teachers ideas on how to teach their lessons with more sensitivity to the way learners go about learning. It also talks about the possibilities open to the learners themselves to improve their learning.