

1.4

POSITION PAPER

NATIONAL FOCUS GROUP

ON

TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING

ISBN 81-7450-494-X

First Edition

Mach 2006 Chaitra 1928

PD 5T BS

© **National Council of Educational
Research and Training, 2006**

Rs. 15.00

*Printed on 80 GSM paper with NCERT
watermark*

Published at the Publication Department
by the Secretary, National Council of
Educational Research and Training, Sri
Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi 110 016 and
printed at Bengal Offset Works, 335, Khajoor
Road, Karol Bagh, New Delhi 110 005

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

English in India is a global language in a multilingual country (Sec. I). A variety and range of English-teaching situations prevail here owing to the twin factors of teacher proficiency in English and pupils' exposure to English outside school. The level of introduction of English is now a matter of political response to people's aspirations rather than an academic or feasibility issue. While endorsing prevailing academic opinion for a later but more effective introduction of English (supporting this with an assessment of the "critical period" or "sensitive window" hypothesis in Sec. IV.1), we also respond to current realities by describing what is achievable in given situations, supplemented with affirmative-action interventions where necessary (Sec. III.2.).

The goals for a language curriculum (Sec. II) are twofold: attainment of a basic proficiency, such as is acquired in natural language learning, and the development of language into an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition through, for example, literacy. This argues for an across-the-curriculum approach that breaks down the barriers between English and other subjects, and other Indian languages. At the initial stages, English may be one of the languages for learning activities that create the child's awareness of the world; at later stages, all learning happens through language. Higher-order linguistic skills generalise across languages; reading, for example, is a transferable skill. Improving it in one language improves it in others, while mother-tongue reading failure adversely affects second-language reading. English does not stand alone. The aim of English teaching is the creation of multilinguals who can enrich all our languages; this has been an abiding national vision (Sec. III.4).

Input-rich communicational environments are a prerequisite for language learning (Sec. III). Inputs include textbooks, learner-chosen texts, and class libraries allowing for a variety of genres: print (for example, Big Books for young learners); parallel books and materials in more than one language; media support (learner magazines/newspaper columns, radio/audio cassettes); and "authentic" materials. The language environment of disadvantaged learners needs to be enriched by developing schools into community learning centres. A variety of successful innovations exist whose generalisability needs exploration and encouragement. Approaches and methods need not be exclusive but may be mutually supportive within a broad cognitive philosophy (incorporating Vygotskian, Chomskyan, and Piagetian principles). Higher-order skills (including literary appreciation and the role of language in gendering) can be developed once fundamental competencies are ensured.

Teacher education needs to be ongoing and onsite (through formal or informal support systems), as well as preparatory. Proficiency and professional awareness are equally to be promoted, the latter imparted, where necessary, through the teachers' own languages (Sec. III.6).

Language evaluation (Sec. III.7) need not be tied to “achievement” with respect to particular syllabi, but must be reoriented to the measurement of *language proficiency*. We discuss some ways of conducting ongoing evaluation of language proficiency. *National benchmarks for language proficiency* need to be evolved preliminary to designing a set of optional English Language Tests that will balance curricular freedom with the standardisation of evaluation that certification requires, and serve to counter the current problem of English (along with mathematics) being a principal reason for failure at Class X. A student may be allowed to “pass without English” if an alternative route for English certification (and therefore instruction) can be provided outside the regular school curriculum.

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This paper builds on themes that evolved out of discussions in the Focus Group and individual position papers presented by each member. While thanking the countless friends and colleagues in the field who have shaped our thoughts over time, we are particularly grateful to the following colleagues for interacting with us: Makhan Lal Tickoo, Champa Tickoo, G. Rajagopal, Shurti Sircar, Rama Kant Agnihotri, Maxine Berntsen, R.P. Jadeja, Maya Pandit, the two teachers from Nellore (Ms. M. Aruna and Shri H.S.V.K. Ranga Rao from IASE, Nellore), and members of the ELTI Directors' Conference at Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL), Hyderabad (March 2005). We thank Vijaya for her assistance.

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1. A GLOBAL LANGUAGE IN A MULTILINGUAL COUNTRY

1.1 Why English?

English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant, its initial role in independent India, tailored to higher education (as a "library language", a "window on the world"), now felt to be insufficiently inclusive socially and linguistically, the current status of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena. It is predicted that by 2010, a surge in English-language learning will include a third of the world's people (Graddol 1997).¹ The opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s has coincided with an explosion in the demand for English in our schools because English is perceived to open up opportunities (Das 2005).

1.2 English in our schools

1.2.1 *The level of introduction of English*

The visible impact of this presence of English is that it is today being demanded by *everyone* at the very *initial* stage of schooling. The English teaching profession has consistently recommended a relatively late (Class IV, V, or VI) introduction of English, and this is reflected in spirit in policy documents. The dissatisfaction with this recommendation is evident in the mushrooming of private English-medium schools and the early introduction of English in state school

systems.² The popular response to systemic failure has been to extend downwards the very system that has failed to deliver. The level of introduction of English has now become a matter of political response to people's aspirations, rendering almost irrelevant an academic debate on the merits of a very early introduction. There are problems of systemic feasibility and preparedness, for example, finding the required number of competent teachers. But there is an expectation that the system should respond to popular needs rather than the other way round.

We address this question, therefore, in various ways. First, we hope through multilingualism to counter some possible ill-effects such as the loss of one's own language(s), or the burden of sheer incomprehension. Second, we describe what can realistically be achieved in given situations, supplemented with affirmative-action interventions where necessary; the aim is to identify delivery systems for comprehensible input to the child, whether in the classroom or outside it. For a fuller understanding of the issues around the early introduction of English, we have included an assessment of the "critical period" or "sensitive window" hypothesis to show that this does not entail a very early introduction of English.

1.2.2 *The variety and range of English teaching in India*

The teaching and learning of English today is characterised by, on the one hand, a diversity of schools and linguistic environments supportive of English acquisition, and, on the other hand, by systemically

¹ Included in this estimate are 150 million Indian children in primary school, and 120 million of their Chinese counterparts, a comment on the embedding of English within school systems in Asia. However, the demand for English may well peak by 2050, more people having learnt it already; and Arabic, Chinese, German, Hindi, and Spanish having also emerged as languages of the future.

² A 2003 NCERT study shows that English is introduced in Class I or Class III by 26 states or union territories out of 35. Only seven states or union territories introduce it in Class IV or Class V (Khan 2005).

pervasive classroom procedures of teaching a textbook for success in an examination, modulated by teacher beliefs influenced to varying degrees by inputs from the English-language teaching profession.³

One way to broadly characterise English-teaching situations in India is in terms of (a) the teacher's English language proficiency (TP), and (b) the exposure of pupils to English outside school, i.e. the availability of English in the environment for language acquisition (EE). (The reference for these parameters for school classification is Nag-Arulmani, 2000.) Kurrien (2005) thus identifies the four types of schools below:

- 1) ↑↑TP, ↑↑EE (e.g. *English-medium private/government-aided elite schools*): proficient teachers; varying degrees of English in the environment, including as a home or first language.
- 2) ↑TP, ↑EE (e.g. *New English-medium private schools*, many of which use both English and other Indian languages): teachers with limited proficiency; children with little or no background in English; parents aspire to upward mobility through English.
- 3) ↓TP, ↓EE (e.g. *Government-aided regional-medium schools*): schools with a tradition of English education along with regional languages, established by educational societies, with children from a variety of backgrounds.
- 4) ↓↓TP, ↓↓EE (e.g. *Government regional-medium schools run by district and municipal education authorities*): They enrol the largest number of elementary school children in rural India. They are also the only choice for the urban poor (who, however, have some options of access to English in the environment). Their teachers

may be the least proficient in English of these four types of schools.

While these examples suggest a rough correlation between type of school management and the variables of teacher proficiency and environmental English, wide variation also obtains *within* each of these school types. Private English-medium schools may differ in the learning opportunities they offer, and this may be reflected in differential language attainment (Nag-Arulmani 2005); pupils in, for example, schools with class libraries read better than those in schools where reading is restricted to monotonous texts and frequent routine tests of spelling lists. Mathew (1997: 41) found, in a curriculum-implementation study, that the 2,700-odd schools affiliated to the CBSE differ in the “culture” arising from “the type of management, funding, geographic location, salary structure, teacher motivation and competence, the type of students they cater for and the type of parents”. Prabhu (1987: 3) suggests that “typologies of teaching situations . . . should thus be seen as an aid to investigating the extent of relevance of a pedagogic proposal”, rather than as absolute categories.

1.2.3 ELT (*English Language Teaching*) in India

Traditionally, English was taught by the grammar-translation method. In the late 1950s, structurally graded syllabi were introduced as a major innovation into the state systems for teaching English (Prabhu 1987: 10). The idea was that the teaching of language could be systematised by planning its inputs, just as the teaching of a subject such as arithmetic or physics could be. (The structural approach was sometimes implemented as the direct method, with an insistence on monolingual

³ English may have far better institutional arrangements to support its teaching than other subjects (but see n.19, on distinguishing the industry of English teaching from questions of second-language acquisition).

English classrooms.) By the late 1970s, however, the behavioural-psychological and philosophical foundations of the structural method had yielded to the cognitive claims of Chomsky for language as a “mental organ”.⁴ There was also dissatisfaction within the English-teaching profession with the structural method, which was seen as not giving the learners language that was “deployable” or usable in real situations, in spite of an ability to make correct sentences in classroom situations. In hindsight, the structural approach as practised in the classroom led to a fragmentation and trivialisation of thought by breaking up language in two ways: into structures, and into skills. The form-focused teaching of language aggravated the gap between the learner’s “linguistic age” and “mental age” to the point where the mind could no longer be engaged.⁵

The emphasis thus shifted to teaching language use in meaningful contexts. British linguists argued that something more than grammatical competence was involved in language use; the term “communicative competence” was introduced to signify this extra dimension.⁶ The attempt to achieve communicative competence assumes the availability of a grammatical competence to build on, and indeed the communicative method succeeds best in the first category of school described above, introducing variety and learner involvement into classrooms where teachers (and learners) have confidence in their knowledge of the language, acquired through exposure. However, for the majority of our learners, the issue is not so much

communicative competence as the acquisition of a basic or fundamental competence in the language (Prabhu 1987: 13). Input-rich theoretical methodologies (such as the Whole Language, the task-based, and the comprehensible input and balanced approaches) aim at exposure to the language in meaning-focused situations so as to trigger the formation of a language system by the mind.

2. GOALS FOR A LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

A national curriculum can aim for

- a cohesive curricular policy based on guiding principles for language teaching and acquisition, which allows for a variety of implementations suitable to local needs and resources, and which provides illustrative models for use.

A consideration of earlier efforts at curriculum renewal endowed some of our discussion with an uneasy sense of *déjà vu*. However, we hope that current insights from linguistics, psychology, and associated disciplines have provided a principled basis for some workable suggestions to inform and rejuvenate curricular practices.

English does not stand alone. It needs to find its place

- ***along with other Indian languages***
 - i. in regional-medium schools: how can children’s other languages strengthen English teaching/learning?
 - ii. in English-medium schools: how can other

⁴ Chomsky made a fundamental distinction between the conscious learning of a kind of knowledge that is constructed culturally through painstaking, cooperative effort over time (such as scientific knowledge), and knowledge that seems to naturally unfold in the human mind in the presence of experience, where the complexity of the system that is learnt far outstrips what has environmentally been presented. This mismatch is sometimes referred to as “Plato’s problem”.

⁵ Moreover, the planned and systematised presentation of language inputs was later shown to be out of step with learners’ internal learning sequences. The relationship between the language presented and the system internalised is non-linear, being mediated by the learners’ mental grammar.

⁶ We note, however, that the Chomskyan use of the term competence, in fact, subsumes both systematicity (“grammaticality”) and acceptability. It denotes the ability to use language in a variety of contexts spontaneously and appropriately.

Indian languages be valorised, reducing the perceived hegemony of English?

- ***in relation to other subjects:*** A language-across-the-curriculum perspective is perhaps of particular relevance to primary education. Language is best acquired through different meaning-making contexts, and hence all teaching is in a sense language teaching. This perspective also captures the centrality of language in abstract thought in secondary education; whereas in the initial stages contextual meaning supports language use, at later stages meaning may be arrived at solely through language.

The aim of English teaching is the creation of multilinguals who can enrich all our languages; this has been an abiding national vision. The multilingual perspective also addresses concerns of language and culture, and the pedagogical principle of moving from the known to the unknown.

2.1 Language acquisition inside and outside the classroom

Second-language pedagogy, more than the teaching of any other curricular subject, must meet the most stringent criterion of universal success: the spontaneous and appropriate use of language for at least everyday purposes. This is a feat achieved in one's own language(s) by every pre-school child (Chomsky 1975). It is this "minimum level of proficiency" (which can, however, be shown to require a mental grammar of remarkable sophistication, which allows for the comprehension and production of language in "real time") that the person on the street aspires to: "speak English", as against merely passing examinations in it, or knowing its grammar.⁷

- Can the English-language classroom replicate the universal success in the acquisition of basic spoken language proficiency that a child spontaneously achieves outside the classroom, for the languages in its environment? If so, how?
- Other spoken language skills in limited domains (for example, for the travel and tourism industry) would build on such a basic proficiency.

2.2 A common cognitive academic linguistic proficiency

Language in education would ideally and ordinarily build on such naturally acquired language ability, enriching it through the development of literacy into an instrument for abstract thought and the acquisition of academic knowledge. We can then speak of a "cognitive academic linguistic proficiency" (cf. Cummins 1979) as language and thinking skills that build on the basis of a child's spontaneous knowledge of language. This is a goal of language education, and education through language. (This discussion has most often been in the context of language education in the mother tongue.)

- Such cognitive and academic skills, moreover, are arguably transferable across languages, to a second language.

This transferability is one of the premises for recommending a relatively late introduction of English: that language-in-education proficiency, developed in the child's own languages, would then naturally extend to a new language. The dissatisfaction with this recommendation is attributable to two factors:

- (i) the unsatisfactory achievement levels of academic linguistic proficiency in the *first*

⁷ Merely in terms of number of words, Aitchison (1988) estimates an hour of conversation to require 5,000 words, and a radio talk to require 9,000 words.

language(s) in, for example, reading and writing, thus the failure to provide an academic base for the second language. There are data to show (Nag-Arulmani 2005) that 40 per cent of children in small towns, 80 per cent of children in tribal areas, and 18 per cent of children in urban schools cannot read in their own language at the primary stage; these disparities widen and translate into general academic failure at later stages.

- (ii) the failure to ensure the spontaneous working knowledge of English on which higher-order skills (such as reading with inferential comprehension, and writing with conceptual clarity) can be built.

Within the eight years of education guaranteed to every child, it should be possible in a span of about four years to ensure basic English-language proficiency. This would include basic literacy skills of reading and writing. But for this the teaching of languages in general must achieve a better success in our schools, for literacy skills are transferable. Alternatively, if English is insisted on as a medium at very early stages, its teaching should ensure better success in literacy in other languages, as documented by West (1941).

3. THE SHAPE OF A CURRICULUM: RESOURCES AND PROCEDURES

3.1 Input-rich environments

Input-rich communicational environments are a prerequisite for language learning. Languages are learned implicitly, by comprehending and communicating messages, either through listening or reading for meaning. We suggest a comprehensible input-rich curriculum that lays the foundation for spontaneous language growth, with the understanding of spoken and written language as precursors to language

production (speech and writing). We also suggest how literacy may be meaningfully integrated into such a curriculum. We have already touched on the connection between literacy in English and in other school languages; in this section, the twin perspectives of multilingualism and language across the curriculum occur as recurrent themes.

A number of researchers (Prabhu 1987, Krashen 1985, Elley and Mangubhai 1983) have stressed that language is acquired when attention is focused not on language form, but on the meaning of messages. On this common ground stand such diverse innovations as the Bangalore Project or Communicational Teaching Project (Prabhu 1987), the Communicative Approach (Widdowson 1978), the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell 1983), and the Whole Language movement. Moving specifically into the area of literacy acquisition, a number of researchers have stressed the need for a balance of explicit skills instruction and a strongly meaningful language-learning environment (Adams 1990; Snow, Burns and Griffin 1998; Stanovich 2000). The focus of literacy development needs to be both on skills and meaning.

The role of meaningful language exposure or “input” for the mind to work on is acknowledged by all cognitive theories of learning and language learning (as opposed to behaviourist theories of learning as habit formation). The “burden of languages” (as of all education) is the burden of incomprehension. This happens when language is taught for its own sake as a set of forms or rules, and not introduced as the carrier of coherent textual meaning; it becomes another “subject” to be passed.⁸

The question is how the learner can receive meaningful language input that is appropriate to her or his age and knowledge of language or readiness for language skills, given the variety and range of English-

learning situations in India. Such input must be provided at least in the classroom, but can also be made available to learners at their own initiative, in a variety of ways; the class and its teacher need not be a limiting factor to learning. The language environment of disadvantaged learners needs to be enriched in particular ways. Many successful innovations in this regard exist in this country; their generalisability beyond their immediate locales needs exploration and encouragement, for example, Interactive Radio Instruction, the Task-based Communicational Approach, and the Whole Language narrative programmes. We describe such *success stories* below.

3.2 English at the initial level

3.2.1 *Building familiarity with the language: A pre-literacy curriculum*

Regardless of the particular class in which English is introduced (Class I–III or Class IV, or Class V–VI), **the aim at the initial levels (the first, or first two years of English) is to**

- **build familiarity with the language (through primarily spoken or spoken-and-written input) in meaningful situations**, so that the child builds up a working knowledge of the language.

“There is at least one characteristic that is common to every *successful* language-learning experience we have ever known, and that is that the learner is exposed one way or another to an adequate amount of the data of the language to be learned” (Rutherford 1987: 18).

- o The reference to “adequate data” suggests that a single textbook presented over a year is inadequate. **The emphasis should shift from mastery learning of this limited input to regular exposure to a variety of meaningful language inputs.**
- o This has implications for evaluation, to be discussed below.

Currently, the emphasis is on early literacy and mastery of answers to prescribed texts. We stress the need for a **pre-literacy curriculum**.

We begin with suggestions for providing “comprehensible input”. **Inputs** include textbooks, other print materials such as Big Books, class libraries, parallel materials in more than one language, and media support (learner magazines, newspaper columns, radio/ audio cassettes, etc.), and the use of “authentic” or “available” materials. Research suggests the existence of a “silent period” of about three months in natural second-language learning situations before the learner attempts to produce any language. The input that the learner receives during this period serves as a base for attempts at early production (which may be limited to a few words, fragments of sentences, and formulaic language). **Thus, the classroom must not insist on early production at the expense of exposure to and understanding of language, checked through the mother tongue, gestures, or single-word answers.**

- o One route to early modified production in the classroom could be through the “pseudo-

⁸ *That language is being learnt through mere exposure, when it is not being taught as language, is evident from the relative success of English-medium schools, where additional English input comes (apart from societal exposure to English) through subject teaching (often resulting in the acquisition of “Indianisms” that may, in fact, be discouraged in the English class). Cf. also “sheltered language teaching” programmes (subject-matter classes made comprehensible for the second-language student, cf. Krashen 1985: 71). The comprehensible-input and language-across-the-curriculum perspectives might help bridge the gap between the burden of incomprehension, and language learning.*

- production” of comprehended input, such as the learning of rhymes and poems, of language routines and formulae for classroom management, greetings, requests, etc. The need for pseudo-production perhaps motivates the current rote-learning approach. By recognising and giving it its legitimate place in the curriculum, true production might be later attempted.⁹
- o Drama and the enacting of plays is a traditional route to such pseudo-production in authentic, comprehended contexts. Beginning with action rhymes, simple plays, or skits, theatre as a genuine class activity can promote the child’s engagement with language and its performance. At later stages, this can develop into the study of rhetoric (along with grammar, see below).

3.2.2 Complementing and supplementing teacher inputs

A limiting factor for providing sustained classroom discourse for comprehensible input is the teacher’s own limited language proficiency (cf. Krishnan and Pandit (2003) for a dismal picture of the preparedness of teachers of English at Class I). However,

- **there are ways to complement as well as to develop teacher competencies or inputs.**
 - (i) Projects such as Interactive Radio Instruction (CLR, Pune)¹⁰ suggest that local radio can deliver simple spoken language in comprehensible and interesting contexts that leads both to language acquisition by the child and to improvement in teacher proficiency, beginning as late as Class V in rural “English as foreign language” contexts. Regular and sustained exposure needs to be ensured, along with continuous feedback about comprehensibility.
 - (ii) Story reading (as opposed to teaching stories as texts) can be developed into a classroom methodology within a Whole Language perspective (Jangid 2005).¹¹ Reading stories out aloud, Repeated reading, Choral reading, Story Retelling, and Rewriting activities can draw on and build on the existing language proficiency and skills of teachers. Regular story reading triggers the acquisition process in children, and will encourage reading in both the teacher as well as the pupil. Important methods to explore are:

⁹ By pseudo-production we mean language behaviour that mimics real production, but is not supported by an underlying system that allows the learner to step outside the boundaries of what has been taught.

¹⁰ The Centre For Learning Resources (CLR), Pune has developed a three-year interactive radio programme, “We Learn English”, for teaching spoken English in rural and urban regional - medium elementary schools. Students were expected to respond in English during and after each of the 250 radio lessons of 15 - minute duration spread over three academic calendar years. Consequently, the cumulative impact on the speaking and listening skills of student listeners was spectacular. The Marathi –English version of this programme was broadcast by All India Radio in Pune District and Mumbai, while the Hindi –English version has been aired in Delhi, Jharkhand, and Uttaranchal. Lakhs of school students, and other young and old listeners interested in learning English, have benefited from this programme

¹¹ Jangid (2005) reports on gains in reading, speaking, and writing resulting from a year-long regular programme of story reading. The work contains detailed discussion of a methodology for reading and associated teacher-led activity, along with pedagogical justification for each; and documents a variety of tasks for ongoing or formative evaluation of language in Class I.

1. Shared reading of Big Books: large-sized high-interest books with text and illustrations, used for group reading (cf. the books from Spark India and The Promise Foundation, Bangalore). As the teacher reads, pupils become familiar first with the story in spoken (read-out) language and the illustrations; an acquaintance gradually develops with the print code. (This replicates in disadvantaged situations the reading out of stories to children in middle and upper-class families, a “pre-literacy” activity shown to promote the development of literacy.)
2. The use of Reading Cards (for example, the English 400 and English 100 cards developed by CIEFL) and the provision of class libraries. The short graded passages of the Reading Cards (beginning with four-sentence stories) allow individual learners to choose their level of difficulty, and progress at their own pace in silent reading (hallmarks of those who develop “the reading habit”), after some initiation by the teacher.
3. “Talking Books” (cassette plus book) model speech as well as reading for both the teacher and the learner. (CIEFL has

some experience in this regard.) This is an area where the nascent market discourages quality private or capitalist initiatives; hence, state support is necessary.

- (iii) Prabhu (1987) describes a “task-based” methodology that leads to the “negotiation of meaning” and “meaning-focused activity” in the classroom.¹² The “text” for language learning here is teacher-talk; the teacher speaks in the classroom “in more or less the same way as an adult (speaks) to a child” (op. cit.: 57). While this requires basic linguistic competence in the teacher, note that it does not require a specialist knowledge of grammar or literature. (As for the kind of English that the teacher may speak, cf. Sec. IV.2 below, and Prabhu op. cit.: 98ff.)

Such approaches and methods need not be exclusive but may be mutually supportive within a broad cognitive philosophy (incorporating Vygotskian, Chomskyan, and Piagetian principles). For example, language growth might be seen to require comprehensible *output* as well as comprehensible *input*; learners’ grammar construction, claimed to be fundamentally implicit, may draw on an explicit route where appropriate or necessary; and reading instruction might include a phonic or a modified phonic approach along with a whole-word approach (as we suggest below). The concept of a child’s *readiness* for particular

¹² The “Bangalore–Madras Project” or the *Communicational Teaching Project* was an important initiative combining theoretical rigour and conceptual clarity with a commitment to evolving a classroom methodology suited to local conditions. Located over a five-year period in eight classes of seven regional-medium schools (including three Corporation or Government schools) in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, its aim was to provide learners with “deployable” language that conforms automatically to norms of implicit grammaticality. As the methodology evolved out of classroom practice, teaching passed from the hands of “specialists” to regular classroom teachers. The team sought to create in the classroom “conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication”, i.e. “understanding, arriving at, or conveying meaning”; the format of a “task” based on a reasoning-gap activity satisfied teachers’ and learners’ “sense of plausibility” of what constituted a serious learning activity (as opposed to language games or role-play); and allowed for meaning-focused classroom activity and the negotiation of meaning within a clear overall direction. A full list of tasks is given in Prabhu (1987).

activities (for example, reading) must guide classroom implementation of syllabus objectives. The classroom, unlike the laboratory, needs to be an inclusive space, sensitive to individual learning styles.

3.2.3 Using existing cognitive and linguistic resources

An important insight emerging from task-based methodology is that we can, and must, create in the classroom “a need to communicate which brings into play not just target-language resources, but *all the other resources learners have at their disposal* (emphasis ours), for example, conjecture, gesture, knowledge of conventions, numeracy, and the mother tongue” (Prabhu 1987: 29). Learners in Class I or Class IV may be “babies” in the new language, but cognitively they are children, not toddlers. Failing to use their (and their teachers’) existing cognitive and linguistic abilities deprives us of a resource, and alienates the learner, who fails to make a connection between the new language and her mental world. This is the consideration behind our recommendation for cutting across the barriers between languages, and between content subjects and languages.¹³

3.2.4 Beginning literacy

Decoding: Bottom-up and top-down

Oracy along with print is one important route to literacy. A holistic or top-down approach (through story reading) that promotes visual recognition of whole words or chunks of language must be complemented

by bottom-up approaches to letter-sound mapping and print decoding (these skills are presently equated with reading). A modified phonic approach via rhyming letter chunks (cf. Goswami 1999) significantly reduces the arbitrariness of English spelling (cf. the consistency of the “a” sound in word groups like *cat, rat, mat, car, far, star, ball, ball, call*; or the predictability of the vowel sounds in the letter sequences *it/ite, at/ate, ot/ote*). The famous Shavian example (*ghoti=fish*) arises because of the decontextualisation of letter groups from their syllabic space in the word (initial *-gh* in English is never pronounced /f/, and the spelling *ti* is pronounced “sh” only in the sequence *-tion*). Adams (1990) is a good introduction to these issues. Pre-literacy oral activities can develop the child’s ability to relate spoken and written language codes through rhymes, commonalities of first sounds in names or words, etc.¹⁴

A print-rich environment

A variety of pre-literacy activities can be undertaken in a *print-rich* environment; the classroom must display signs, charts, and notices that organise its work, even as a middle-class home does (thus giving its child an edge over the first-generation learner), for recognition “iconically”, as semiotic signs. The teacher can draw attention to “environmental print” where available (notices, signboards, labels); each class and each pupil can collect their own examples. Prabhu (1987) mentions beginner literacy-promoting communicational tasks in Classes III–V, which include labelling diagrams systematically with letters of the alphabet. Jangid (2005) shows that exposure to print through stories (Class I

¹³ Prabhu tells us (*loc. cit.*): “. . . task-based teaching of beginners did not throw up any major problems . . . One small advantage was the existence of several English loan-words in everyday use in Indian languages, and in the school ‘dialects,’ some of which were therefore available even in the first lesson for beginners.” (*English began in Class III in Tamil Nadu, and Class V in Karnataka, at the time of the project.*)

¹⁴ Learner-generated English words brought in from the child’s home, neighbourhood, and the media become a resource for the entire class. Nag-Arulmani et al. (2003) show that for Class III children struggling with English, exposure to a variety of sound games can promote children’s reading, spelling, and vocabulary development.

or Class III) leads to a child's conceptualisation of the page space in terms of centred headings, paragraphs, and regular horizontal lines, contrasting with earlier chaotic writing.

Dictation is also now seen as a whole-language activity that requires the child to decode and hold in the mind chunks of text that must be reformulated for writing (Davis and Rinvolutri 1988).

3.2.5 Systems for support and delivery of comprehensible input

We have described in some detail the activities and materials that promote language growth in the early years because in the absence of these the early introduction of English will fail to achieve its purpose. This section, in conjunction with those on multilingualism, teacher preparation, and evaluation, provides a basis for affirmative-action interventions in schools where neither teacher proficiency nor the environment are sufficiently supportive for English acquisition. The aim should be to identify delivery systems for comprehensible inputs to the child, whether in the classroom or outside it; for example, the school can serve as a community resource centre for children after school hours. The current emphasis on "remediation" should yield to such supportive interventions as will ensure a baseline of success; when the majority of children appear to require "remediation", it is clearly the system itself that requires it. Currently, teachers and schools tend to complain about the home background of the child not being sufficiently supportive; instead the onus should be on

the system to provide the requisite support to disadvantaged learners.

3.3 English at later levels: Higher-order skills

3.3.1 Vocabulary, reading, and literature

Lexical knowledge is now acknowledged to be central to communicative competence and the acquisition and development of a second language. Even in a first language, ". . . whereas the grammar of a language is largely in place by the time a child is 10 years old . . . , vocabulary continues to be learned throughout one's lifetime" (Schmitt 2000: 4). The foundation for vocabulary development and writing at later levels is through reading extensively with comprehension and interest.

The debate on "instructed" and "incidental" vocabulary acquisition suggests that the very large vocabulary¹⁵ required of a high-school student for academic purposes is not acquired in an all-or-none, "taught" manner, but built up gradually and incrementally through reading (cf. Krashen 1989; Schmitt 2000). When language is adequately taught in the early years, the learner can naturally build up these higher-order skills independently, with some guidance from the classroom. Research has also shown us that greater gains accrue when language instruction moves away from the traditional approach of learning definitions of words (the dictionary approach) to an enriched approach, which encourages associations with other words and contexts (the encyclopedia approach) (Fawcett and Nicolson 1991; Snow et al. 1991).

Materials used or available as texts in class libraries may be in print as well as multi-media formats. Children

¹⁵ A 20-year-old university student receiving instruction through English is estimated to have or require a knowledge of 20,000 "word families" (a word along with its inflected and derived forms). Assuming acquisition of 1,000 word families a year, a 17-year-old school-leaving student should know between 15,000 and 17,000 word families to be prepared for university education.

must be exposed to a whole range of genres. As at all levels, but particularly at this level, the materials need to be sensitive to perspectives of equity (gender and societal) and harmony (between humans, and between humans and nature), given that a quantum of independent reading is expected (at least half a dozen pieces in a year). Sensitisation to language as a vehicle of gendering can also be initiated for those groups where teacher and student competencies permit this; this is an ideal area for an across-the-curriculum exploration of language use.

Traditionally, language-learning materials beyond the initial stages have been sourced from literature: prose, fiction, and poetry. While there is a trend for inclusion of a wider range of more contemporary and authentic texts (due both to a functional orientation of the language curriculum and a broader definition of what constitutes literature), accessible and culturally appropriate pieces of literature continue to play a pivotal role; most children think of the English class as a place in which to read stories. The use of language to develop the imagination is a major aim of later language study. Provision may in addition be made in the curriculum for the optional study of literatures in English: British, American, and literatures in translation: Indian, Commonwealth, European, and so on. Simultaneously, an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach can be adopted where necessary and feasible. (Formulaic uses of language, such as in tourists' phrase books, do not presuppose any systematic or spontaneous knowledge of the language, and are excluded from our purview.) These approaches will

serve as precursors of specialisations to follow in the study of language at the undergraduate level.

3.3.2 Language and Critical Thinking: Reference Skills, Grammar, and Rhetoric

Pupils' introduction to writing at later stages could be through such authentic tasks as letter writing for people in their locality who need a scribe, and letter writing to other children (we may think of inter-school programmes to promote this activity), or to others in society who volunteer to correspond with the child. Emphasis must be laid on study skills: note-making, note-taking, and reference skills; and spoken and written communication skills: public speaking, interviewing, and debating, rather than on writing essays on well-worn topics. Exposure may be attempted to well-known speeches, and the structure of arguments (whether logical or emotional) may be analysed.

Grammar can be introduced after basic linguistic competence is acquired, as a means of reflecting on academic language and an intellectually interesting activity in its own right. Some grammar is in any case necessary for the ability to meaningfully make use of dictionary entries, as learner-dictionaries now incorporate a fair amount of "grammar" and usage as notes and in their coding. Grammar is not a route for developing primary or usable knowledge of language,¹⁶ but it can serve as a tool for increasing the language repertoire and for understanding the construction of text "rhetoric" and argumentation.

There is a persisting teacher concern that grammar is necessary for "accuracy" (as against "fluency") in language. This presupposes that the learner has had

¹⁶ The term *grammar* seems to be understood in a variety of ways. We do not rule out the possibility of encouraging "parsing" skills or strategies (identifying sense groups to see how they fit into the sentence, or inserting sense groups to expand a sentence) as a means of making input more comprehensible at earlier stages, especially in English-minimal environments. Some grammar (such as the appropriate use of prepositions) may more appropriately be termed the learning of vocabulary (including now under this term idiomatic or fixed expressions, for example, *in time and on time*).

enough exposure to the language to produce it with sufficient systematicity to allow the identification of recurrent errors.

3.4 Multilingualism in the English class or school

3.4.1 *The regional-language context*

At present, the mother tongue enters the English class as a surreptitious intruder; teachers may “concurrently translate” and “explain” texts before dictating answers. It can be given its due place by being used for discussion and understanding along with an engagement with English. One illustration of this is in Prabhu (1987); the limits on the use of the mother tongue in the Bangalore Project were naturally set by the requirements of the task, which was input in English, and required responses in English; the mother tongue made the language comprehensible where necessary. Given a variety of inputs in English, and a genuine attempt to understand them, the mother tongue need not be an interloper but a resource. Krashen (1985: 94) points out that “(while) concurrent translation is not effective”, the use of two languages in the classroom can be “done in such a way as to provide comprehensible input in the target language, using the first language to provide background information”.

An understanding of what constitutes legitimate use of the mother tongue needs to be arrived at by the involvement of the teacher in the framing of vehicles for English teaching. There is a need to address the mindsets that teachers have on what levels of language mixing are legitimate. Some possibilities are:

- a) **Removing the barriers between languages, and between “languages” and “subjects”, in the primary school.** At the lower primary stage, or at least in Classes I–III, English can occur in tandem with the first language(s) for learning activities designed to create awareness

of the world around the child (Das 2005). Materials need to be designed to promote such multilingual activity, and clear methodological guidelines need to be worked out in cooperation with teachers to see how more than one language can be naturally used. Linguistic purism, whether of English or the Indian languages, must yield to a tolerance of code-switching and code-mixing if necessary.

- b) Introducing parallel texts in more than one language. These may be the same story; for example, National Book Trust (NBT) has published stories written in English as well as in the Indian languages (cf. Amritavalli and Rameshwar Rao 2001). The Promise Foundation has Big Books in four Indian languages and English; CIEFL has bilingual books using a Whole Language approach. Such parallel texts may not be precise translations of one another but may convey the same or similar meaning, or involve similar language activity such as rhymes, sound games, etc. that sensitise the child to language-sound structures. Reading is a *transferable* skill; improvement in reading in one language results in reading improvement in general (West 1914), not just for languages sharing the same scripts, but also in bi-scriptal situations (West worked with Bangla and English; little more is now known about bi-scriptal situations and the transferability of reading skills).
- c) Using the known language for the *reconstruction* of the meaning of the attempted expression through imperfect English, in consultation with the learner (cf. Champa Tickoo’s presentation to the Focus Group).
- d) While the suggestions above see the languages working in tandem, or in parallel, there is also

experimental work available on bilingual or mixed-code texts for teaching reading (cf. Dowerah 2005, Felix 1998); their pedagogic potential can be explored.

- e) The production of **bilingual learners' dictionaries** at various levels must be undertaken as a state initiative as the fragmented market here discourages quality capitalist initiatives. Such dictionaries, readily available in, for example, English/ French/ Spanish/ Italian/ Japanese contexts, will encourage bi-literacy and bilingualism besides promoting comprehensibility of input and independent reading.
- f) Yet another bilingual educational model is to have inputs in a foreign language with production in a familiar language, sometimes reflected in a demand by (English-medium) university students for writing their answers in their own language (some universities allow this). (We note that the teaching of French (literary) texts in British high schools is accompanied by answers in English.)

While not all of these suggestions may be immediately workable, they do suggest the availability of a number of alternatives for various contexts. These are not attempts to “dilute” the English curriculum but rather to integrate ground realities and needs with choices for delivery systems for English (cf. also the section on the textbook, below.)

3.4.2 *The English-medium context*

A serious challenge is to provide the urban elite child with a usable language other than English. A current model is the teaching of some subjects (such as the social sciences) in a non-English language (for some discussion, see Amritavalli 2001). Within the English

class, texts from Indian writing in English (both fiction and non-fiction) are now found, as well as translations from Indian languages.

But the interaction between English and the other Indian languages needs to progress beyond this. Ways need to be explored to read parallel texts in their original language and English translation, for example. More fundamentally, teachers of English and the other Indian languages need to agree on what constitutes academic language activity, and how this can be integrated into everyday life. Newspapers and magazines are now available that run parallel language editions (indeed, children's magazines such as *Chandamama* and *Amar Chitra Katha* have had a history of publishing in the Indian languages along with English); television channels have parallel language channels; a pool of professionals who function in more than one language is available. These resources must be allowed to enter the classroom at the primary, and especially at the secondary levels.

3.5 Textbooks

All this implies much more teacher and learner control over the *texts* used in class, *including textbooks*. *Curricular freedom cannot exist in the presence of a single prescribed text*. Earlier practices of choosing from a *range* of available texts can be revived; some states like Orissa have come up with innovative textbooks with short units that can be “covered” within a single class (Sunwani 2005), incorporating the idea of a reading card. Language should be seen as a “dynamic” text, i.e. exposure should be to new occurrences of comparable language samples everyday, rather than repeatedly to a single text that is mastered (Amritavalli (1999) makes an analogy with the learning of a raga in Indian classical music). This will prepare the child for tests of “unseen” comprehension passages. Teachers and learners need

to evolve for themselves a balance in the use of predictable and unpredictable texts that suits their individual levels of comfort.

3.5.1 Learner-chosen texts

Preliminary research exists on the use of learner-chosen texts (Kumaradas 1993), i.e. articles, books, or shorter items such as paragraphs, jokes, or cartoons that learners bring to class to share. Stimulating learner-search for suitable material encourages reading and extensive reading. It also opens up the class to “authentic” material, a resource neglected by the system; the ELT literature has wide-ranging discussions on the use of such material. One teacher writes about how trips to the post office and the railway station allowed the children to collect samples of English “texts”. With older learners, radio, print or television news or news features can be used (as CIEFL research suggests).

A “problem” is the existence of “guides” to prescribed texts. Instead of merely condemning the practice, we might ask why guides exist; they bridge the gap between local competencies (teacher/learner) and centralised systemic expectations (examinations/ prescribed texts). A useful distinction can be made between “simplified” texts and “simple” texts; compare, for example, an article on butterflies in a science text with a newspaper science column or an adult encyclopedia entry on this topic, and again with an article on butterflies in a children’s book of knowledge; all these differ not merely in language but in information structure. *The information structure of textbooks that requires guides needs to be examined.*

Space should be provided for more creative textbooks to emerge. There is a dearth of books written imaginatively in simple English for older learners. There does exist a range of creative literature in India

for children in the private as well as the public sectors, but much of it does not find entry into the classroom for a variety of reasons.

3.6 Teacher preparation: Teacher training and development

Teacher education needs to be ongoing and onsite (through formal or informal support systems) as well as preparatory. Emphasis must be laid on teacher proficiency in or familiarity with the language, as the teacher is often a role model (for example, for reading). This is also one way to cultivate teacher awareness of or sensitivity to language learning. Proficiency and professional awareness are equally to be promoted, the latter to be imparted, where necessary, through the teachers’ own languages.

A curriculum is only as effective as its implementation. The 1960s structural curriculum aimed at “teacher-proof” material; this model failed linguistically, pedagogically, and psychologically. Subsequent presumptions of the teacher as “facilitator” of learning similarly face problems of credibility. While the teacher need not be the sole purveyor of language input (as recognised, for example, by his/her dependence on a textbook), the success of any classroom activity or innovation stems from the teacher’s resources in the language.

- 1) Teacher proficiency in English is linked to the teachers’ sense of satisfaction, indeed to his/her willingness to teach English (Krishnan and Pandit 2003). This factor has hitherto not been addressed in teacher-training programmes. The recommendation for a later start for English presumed the availability of better (language-proficient) teachers at later stages (which, however, may not be true). With English now having been extended to situations where the

teacher and the classroom are the sole sources of input, teacher proficiency has to be addressed urgently.

- ii) When proficiency is given its due place, there is freedom to provide the ideational or development component of teacher preparation in the teacher's own language, ensuring comprehension as well as debate. Teacher training through English has often found the language of its academic content an obstacle to understanding; this leads to jargonisation of teaching methodology. The Assam experience (Dowerah 2005) shows that academic content can be delivered in the teacher's own language.

School teachers must mandatorily receive both pre-service training and in-service education at regular intervals; systemic provision must be made to spare teachers from constant routine activity. Pre-service education could profit by updating its curricula (and training personnel) to reflect the cognitive revolution in learning; too often "lesson planning" is still done in terms of immediate behavioural objectives, in spite of the accumulated evidence for language and vocabulary "growth" as against conscious knowledge of content, rules, or definitions.

- iii) Onsite intervention is essential if workable ideas are to be identified and put into practice. The current gulf between "theory" (or academic posturing) and "practice" (or routinised survival), and theoreticians and practitioners, is a reflection of the gulf in their physical workspaces. Teachers can form self-help groups if "trainers" are not available in sufficient numbers, and supported with reading

and media material. This will encourage grass-roots-level innovation.

There is a need for reflective teachers who have a deep understanding of language learning and the English-multilingual classroom. The current pre- and in-service curriculum must be restructured to this end. Two key areas that must be incorporated in teacher-education programmes are an understanding of the psychology of learning and current knowledge about the processes of language and literacy acquisition, including topics such as those mentioned in this document.

3.7 Evaluation

The examination is universally felt to be the single or main obstacle to curriculum reform. How can evaluation be made an enabling factor for learning rather than an impediment?

Language evaluation need not be limited to "achievement" with respect to particular syllabi, but must be reoriented to measurement of *language proficiency*. We discuss some ways of conducting ongoing evaluation of language proficiency.

3.7.1 Ongoing continuous evaluation

Recommendations for ongoing, continuous, or formative evaluation contrast with ground realities and problems reported by teachers, suggesting that ongoing evaluation can become meaningful only when teachers and learners both take responsibility for their own progress, rather than performing to external benchmarks (real or imaginary, immediate or ultimate). Teachers and learners must be able to recognise the "occurrence of learning", a mental growth as imperceptible as physical growth.

Imagine the absurdity of a nutritional programme (excluding crash diets or miracle growth foods) that

requires the heights and weights of students to be measured at daily, weekly, or even monthly intervals. Yet continuous evaluation seems to work on the ground in precisely such an unintuitive way. This malaise cannot be cured except through a deep understanding of the learning process, which is individual and self-regulatory. This deeper understanding is essential for teachers to then be able to perceive (and appreciate) subtle changes in children's language learning and proficiency. Perhaps all evaluation should ultimately aim at self-evaluation (a term fashionable in distance education, where its absence is deplored) if learners are to be able to exercise choices for learning and become "lifelong learners". A teacher who knows his pupils is then primarily a sympathetic facilitator of the learner's self-evaluation (in contrast to an anonymous evaluator, who measures achievement with respect to standardised benchmarks).

It is *how* one evaluates that will decide whether a child will *want* to be evaluated. While even the most child-centred methods of evaluation will be anxiety provoking for some, there is no question that a system of evaluation must be put in place. It is thus a question of both *how* and *how much*. Learners participate in evaluations with more comfort when the experience is not always a failure and the outcomes can be seen as a legitimate and appropriate way toward the next step in learning. Unfortunately, for most children the immediate role played by current evaluation methods within the *learning* process is not clear. Continuous evaluation has to facilitate and guide teaching: by determining the learner's current stage of development or attainment, in order to identify her "zone of proximal development" (cf. Krashen's requirement that input should be at the *i+1* stage if the learner's language is at the *i* stage).

Learning attainments are results of language opportunities. Below we list a few pointers to such attainment.

Speaking

Beginning to speak

- i) In mother tongue(s) learning, speech progresses from a one-word, mostly nouns, stage to the production of multi-word sentences with verbs, auxiliaries, determiners, adjectives, and prepositions, perhaps through a two-word stage. Some research at CIEFL (Jangid 2005; Vijaya (in progress)) suggests that second-language learner-speech progresses through similar stages. Typically, learner control of language is reflected in longer mean length of utterance; sustained language input is reflected in such a growth in output (in response, for example, to pictures shown to the child). In contrast, children from rigidly taught classrooms remain inarticulate, or produce single words, mostly nouns, in response to such pictures. Thus, teachers can get an intrinsic sense of language growth in the child with such a task, administered at three- or four-month intervals.
- ii) The results for such an evaluation can be:
 - (a) in the form of an entry (a comment) in a portfolio that is maintained for each child ("portfolio assessment"); OR
 - (b) recorded in teacher and/or learner diaries. Teachers' diaries as a source for teacher development are being widely discussed. Learners can also be encouraged to maintain private, frank diaries of their learning experiences, in a language they know, to monitor their own progress.

Speaking: Sub-skills. At later stages, speaking can be analysed into sub-skills for testing.

Reading

Self-monitoring for comprehension and difficulty level. Reading programmes such as *English 400* have a built-in assessment, with cards arranged in graded levels of difficulty for monitoring progress. They need standardisation for evaluation.

Reading: Some sub-skills

- a) Reading aloud/decoding
As children become more proficient in decoding, they read faster (words per minute) with fewer mistakes. There may be children who progress from the mere spelling out of the letters of a word, to spelling and sounding out the word, using spelling out as a “word attack” skill for new words.
- b) Scanning a text (such as a list, a telephone directory, an advertisement) for information
- c) Reading for given information (factual comprehension)
- d) Reading for inference
- e) Extended reading

The testing of writing and listening can similarly be broken up into sub-skills. This sort of testing can be complemented by integrated language tests (beginning with the Cloze test, for example). A sub-skills approach to evaluation reflects the teachers’ intuitions that particular students may have particular strengths; extroverted, articulate speakers may not be very interested in or good at an introverted, private activity like reading. The teacher can identify areas of strength as well as areas where help is needed.

3.7.2 Summative Evaluation

Must be “proficiency” rather than “achievement” oriented, i.e. designed not to test the mastery of studied passages, but rather the ability to use the language

appropriately in new (albeit recurring) contexts, in

- o Reading age-appropriate material
- o Listening to and understanding age-appropriate material
- o Conversing on age-appropriate topics
- o Writing on age-appropriate topics
- o Control over receptive vocabulary
- o Control over expressive vocabulary

National benchmarks for language proficiency

need to be evolved by first gathering reliable descriptive data in all these respects from representative all-India samples. Such benchmarking of national norms or averages is well known as a precursor to the adoption of support initiatives where necessary in the social sciences and education. It will also balance the curricular freedom that we suggest should be provided during the learning process, with the standardisation of evaluation that certification ultimately requires.

The benchmarking should lead to a set of National English Language Tests, a bank of tests that learners and teachers can use for self-evaluation by opting to take them. These tests should allow for a much finer measure of proficiency than a broad overall grade or score (currently, scores on comprehension of unseen passages are conflated with scores on the recall of passages already studied, thus bundling even “proficiency” with “achievement”). It is a robust teacher intuition that not all learners are equally at home in all the four skills; thus, good speakers may not be good writers, as there may be a trade-off between “accuracy” and “fluency” in the learning process. Neither are all skills equally important for all professions. Scores that reflect differential learner aptitudes and strengths will enhance employment potential, and have a washback effect on the curriculum.

Importantly, a set of National English Language Tests will also serve to counter the current problem of

English (along with mathematics) being a principal reason for failure at Class X. If an alternative route for English certification (and therefore instruction) can be provided outside the regular school curriculum, a student may be allowed to “pass without English” at Class X.

In sum, **standardised national benchmarks** for language skills that culminate in a set of National English Language Tests for various levels will:

- 1) allow individual schools or students to get a sense of where they stand, their strengths and weaknesses, and how to progress;
- 2) balance freedom of learning (curriculum, time frame) with standardisation of assessment; and
- 3) delink failure *in English* at Class X from failure at Class X, and provide an alternative route for English certification outside the regular school curriculum.

4. TWO SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

4.1 The critical period or sensitive window hypothesis

There is much ongoing debate over whether the mind’s “language acquisition device” is available in *adult* second-language acquisition; a standard journal in the field is *Second Language Research*, founded in 1985. A classic study suggesting a correlation between a grammatical principle called Subjacency and the age of second-language acquisition is Johnson and Newport (1989).

As for language acquisition in children, Lenneberg (1967) presented a biological argument for a critical period, extending from age 2 till 12, or puberty. The Lenneberg hypothesis was about the need for activation of biologically given physical or mental structures within a time frame (that is now referred to as a “sensitive

window”); it made limited claims about *adult* second-language acquisition, centring its discussion on recovery from (mother tongue) language loss by relateralisation, or neural plasticity.

Krashen (1985) argues against Lenneberg, citing evidence that the end of the critical period (the cut-off period for recovery from aphasia) may be as early as age 5; but (as most researchers agree) second-language acquisition with even a native-like pronunciation can be achieved by learners up to about 8 years of age (beyond that age, pronunciation tends to suffer). On the other hand, current research suggests that a “mother-tongue perceptual filter” is in place extremely early; thus, babies can prosodically distinguish (in terms of stress and rhythm) *all* languages at birth, but by two *months* of age they distinguish only their own language type from a different language type (for example, English/ Dutch distinguished from French/ Spanish) (Mehler and Christophe 2000). (This helps babies to go on to determine the word order (SVO/SOV) of their language.) Bilingual babies take a little longer to reach this stage of discrimination (under four months).

It is this evidence for a *range* of ages linked to *particular* language abilities in normal and non-normal language acquisition that prompts the change in terminology to *sensitive windows* (suggesting optimal periods for learning) from *critical periods* (suggesting cut-offs).

Researchers using brain-imaging to monitor brain activity in adults have found a link between proficiency level and area of representation, but no effect of age of acquisition (Perani et al. 1998). This PET study tested Italians “who had learned English after the age of 10 and had attained excellent performance” (Mehler and Christophe 2000: 903). A study by Kim et al. (1997) using fMRI during “silent speech” found overlap in Wernicke’s (comprehension) area, but segregation in

Broca's (production) area, of two languages, correlating with age of acquisition; but this study did not control for proficiency.

It is evident that the results of these studies are at best equivocal. Little Indian research is available in these areas. At any rate, beginning English as late as Class V (age 10+) would still fall within the Lenneberg "window". The issue is not so much the age at which English is begun but the exposure and facilities made available for learning this language; two to three years of good opportunities are preferable to a prolonged (up to 10 years, starting at Class I) failure.¹⁷

There may be something to learn here from the successful teaching of foreign languages in India (French, German, . . .) to adults. Moreover, the Indian experiences of

- i) daughters-in-law learning the language of their in-laws;
- ii) regional-medium school products who go on to achieve native-like proficiency in English as academics and intellectuals; and
- iii) control of multilinguality by All-India services personnel and their families

need to be chronicled, carefully evaluated, and critically examined.

In the meanwhile, societal trends can only be stemmed by demonstrable alternative routes to success. We should aim to set up multilingual schools where no single language is privileged as the "medium of instruction", but where languages are used as they are available, as conduits to resources.

4.2 Which English?

In its primary spoken form, language is a continuum of social or geographical dialects that are mutually intelligible at adjacent locations, whereas locations

separated geographically, socially, or in time may become unintelligible. Most speakers command more than one spoken dialect or register of language (for example, formal and informal varieties). Written varieties of language, after the invention of print, have tended towards a standard variety that serves as the norm, particularly in education and academic life; this is necessary given the relative permanence of such communication.

Discussions on what model of English is appropriate for India centre mostly around the pronunciation (i.e. spoken English), and secondarily on lexis or vocabulary. The criterion for an acceptable pronunciation has to be intelligibility. David Crystal's (2004) concept of a tri-dialectal model, with speakers moving smoothly from a regional dialect (such as Punjabi English or Tamil English), to a national dialect (Indian English), or an international dialect where required, seems to be a feasible one. The success of young Indians at call centre jobs shows that "accent training" is a matter of unlearning obvious regionalisms and arriving at a neutral speech style. This is achieved in large part by learning to slow down speech, speaking to a rhythm, and articulating with clarity, factors that improve the sound of speech in any language.

As for the sounds themselves, spoken "Indian English" has been described as having some pan-Indian characteristics such as long vowels instead of diphthongs, and retroflex consonants instead of alveolar ones. Many more characteristics of "Indian English" reflect the various mother tongues of the speakers, given the fact that "India" is a nation, but "Indian" is not a language. The less obtrusive these mother-tongue characteristics are, the more acceptable the pronunciation of the other tongue. It is also a common experience that a person may have more than

¹⁷ See also the Report of the one-man committee on English in primary education in West Bengal, 1998, pp. 22–28.

one speech style, just as he understands many accents other than his own.

Coming to lexis, linguistically the vocabulary of a language is an open class that enriches a language the more it borrows. It is well known that the strength of the English vocabulary lies in the richness of its sources. Standard dictionaries currently have supplements of words commonly occurring in English used in India; there surely cannot now be any reason to keep these words out of the classroom. We include in lexis the idiomatic use of prepositions: *in a bus* rather than *on a bus*, and the use of *into* in mathematics; the latter means the division of one number by another in British English, but the multiplication of two numbers in India. Such usages need not be seen as non-standard grammar.

As for the rest, we expect a comprehensible input-rich curriculum to trigger the formation of a linguistic system in the mind that approximates to standard varieties; cf. Prabhu (1987) for more discussion.¹⁸ It is obvious that we do not think that Indian English is an inferior variety; nor is the Indian teacher's English inferior, once proficiency—a basic grammatical competence in the language—is ensured. But a national curriculum must envisage comparability of inputs for all kinds of learners. Popular opinion has already forced the revision of a stance whereby English was available

to only a privileged few at the onset of schooling, and to others only later. We would not now want some learners to learn “English” while others rest content with “Indian English”. We see the attainment of a standard, internalised English competence as both practicable and desirable.

The question of the model of English to teach should (in any case) not loom so large in the teachers' minds as to prevent the acquisition of any English at all. Nor should simple lack of competence in English masquerade as “Indian English”, pending a more systematic documentation of this variety. In a wider context, there is a great demand for teachers (and teacher educators) from India in the global market. This should give us greater confidence about our linguistic abilities in English.¹⁹

5. RESEARCH PROJECTS

The initiation of research projects grounded in an awareness of current thinking is necessary for the provision of baseline data in language education, for curricular innovations and their implementation, and for theoretical progress in understanding second-language acquisition. A few suggestions for broad areas within which such projects may be conceptualised are made below.

¹⁸ *Such a system may have a few often observed “Indian” characteristics, which interfere not with intelligibility but with social acceptability. To the extent, for example, that using too good to mean very good interferes with the intended meaning, it needs to be corrected. Failure to invert the auxiliary in questions, or unnecessary inversion of auxiliary in embedded questions (Why you said so? I wonder why did he say so) do not interfere with intelligibility, although they may be socially—and educationally—marked.*

¹⁹ *An interesting question is the relationship of Language Teaching to English Language Teaching (ELT), where the latter may be perceived as primarily a British industry. We have grounded our discussions in the broader field of Second Language Acquisition, perceiving our responsibility in this paper in pedagogic terms, and addressing ourselves to curriculum renewal in this nation through current insights into the psychology of learning and the psychology of language. Thus, many of our observations and recommendations (such as the discussion of a Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency) pertain to language teaching (or language in education) in general. Much current discussion in the ELT profession is based on the politics and ideology of English: English (and more broadly, Western) hegemony over the Third World (cf. Canagarajah 2005). To an appreciable extent, concerns such as multilingualism and validation of local knowledge or choices have been incorporated into our recommendations. Thus, we do not see the need to enter further into the intellectual debate between the West and ourselves, particularly as we see the attainment of a standard, internalised English competence as both practicable and desirable.*

1. Language across the curriculum: The language of social science and science textbooks (including verbal mathematics): patterns of questioning, and the relation of content to language
2.
 - a) Language inputs and language growth: a holistic perspective
 - b) Language in spoken form (with or without print support)
 - c) Language in written form (with or without read-aloud support)
 - d) Status of English at the primary level
 - e) A bank of activity and text materials (Level I)
3. Methods and materials to promote multilingualism
4. Curricular choices for special groups (socially marginalised, learning disabled)
5. Outcomes of teacher training programmes

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers

- All teachers who teach should have basic proficiency in English.
- All teachers should have the skills to teach English in ways appropriate to their situation and levels, based on their situation and levels, based on a knowledge of how languages are

learnt.

These two recommendations have implications for the content of pre-service and in-service teacher-education programmes.

Curriculum

- A variety of materials should be available to provide an input-rich curriculum, which focuses on meaning.
- Multilinguality should be the aim in English-medium as well as regional-medium schools. Similarly, language-across-curriculum perspectives should be adopted.

This has implications for textbook design and choice of appropriate methods (class libraries and media support).

Evaluation

- Evaluation to be made an enabling factor for learning rather than an impediment. Ongoing assessment should document a learner's progress through the portfolio mode. Language evaluation need not be tied to "achievement" with respect to particular syllabi, but must be reoriented to the measurement of language proficiency.
- National benchmarks for language proficiency should be evolved as a preliminary to the preparation of a set of English-language tests.

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