ABSTRACT

This study attempts a visualization of the process of (second) language learning, and on the basis of this visualized 'picture' it makes proposals for a strategy of remediation to be employed at the Intermediate level of the ESL programme in India.

Chapter I is introductory, and it clarifies the context of the study, the term 'remediation', the nature of the problem, and the purpose of the study.

The study falls into two parts: Part I comprising Chapters II, III and IV (apart from Chapter I) is a hypotheses-building one, and Part II comprising Chapters V and VI is a hypothesis-testing one.

The hypotheses-building first part culminates in the presentation in Chapter IV of the visualized 'picture' of the process of (second) language learning, and the hypotheses arising from this regarding the factors which are defective in the ESL programme in India and how these defects may be rectified.

Chapters II and III work systematically towards such a culmination. The strategy followed in these two chapters is one in which views on language learning/teaching are brought in for a discussion that leads the way up to the final portrayal
of the (second) language learning process. This being the case, it has not been possible to organize the presentation of these views chronologically or thematically. Theoretical principles and practical guidelines put forward by theoreticians and practitioners belonging to different times and schools of thinking have been examined purely as views on the theme and have been employed in the systematic building up of a particular stance regarding ESL.

Chapter II discusses pre-Chomskyan views whereas Chapter III deals with Chomskyan and related views on language learning/teaching. Together they prepare the ground for the presentation of the 'picture' in Chapter IV. Another aspect of the study to be emphasized is that, from the beginning, it has its vision fixed on the particular theoretical position (regarding ESL) that it proposes to put forward, and therefore, makes use of only those views (expressed by earlier theoreticians and practitioners in the field) which directly contribute to the mainline argument either by agreeing or by disagreeing with some prominent point or issue being discussed. Such views are examined and commented on in order to consistently develop the theoretical stance envisaged. In other words, views which are not relevant to the mainstream thinking of the study are left out for the sake of coherence. The study, that way, is not an exhaustive one in its treatment of the various schools of thinking and the major movements (in ELT) such as the
structural approach, the communicative approach, etc. At the same time it has a clearly articulated stance of its own to present. This trend is noticeable especially in Chapter IV which brings in only those specific views which are relevant for the support necessary for the theoretical position being argued out.

The hypotheses that emerge from the 'picture' in Chapter IV clearly prescribe a series of 'steps' to be taken in a typical Indian remedial situation: there are various 'preliminary steps' by which the knowledge of the code is established before the 'advanced steps' of code-meaning linking are taken. (By the way, this study uses the term 'meaning' comprehensively to signify the different levels of meaning; this point will be further clarified within the study.) The main thesis of this study, as Chapters II, III and IV substantiate, is that no language learner achieves the free and creative use of a language until he has stored in his language repertoire a large enough number of sentence-level units of the code 'perfectly fused' with the corresponding units of meaning so that they are readily available for use as they are on any ordinary/normal occasion of language use.

This study vehemently argues that language is learnt, if at all, only as a code for expressing meaning; when meaning is shut out, the code by itself has no relevance to the
human mind to which any language is only a code for expressing meaning. While the native learner tackles the code that is presented to him as the means for shaping and putting out the meaning that he already has in his mind (perhaps in some incoherent form), the second language learner who learns his second language in artificial circumstances and through contrived situations (not through the means of natural communication), and who already has (the mastery of) another code for the expression of meaning, tends to tackle the new code as an alternative code: his attention is likely to be focused more on the rules (for producing the forms) and the various forms in the new code rather than on how the units of the new code embody meaning. This misplaced attention — misplaced because of the artificial character of the conditions for language learning — makes it more difficult for him to master the code, because the code is best mastered when it is learnt, not artificially as a subject of study as in the second language classroom, but spontaneously as a medium that is used for conveying content which remains at the centre or focus of attention. In natural communication the focus of attention normally stays on the meaning or the message to be conveyed or retrieved.

The second language learner does not repeatedly encounter/express the same unit of meaning as in real life
communication, and therefore, he has no chance like the native learner of imbibing various oft-used units of the code 'lock, stock and barrel' — the most and the least meaning carrying items all in one chunk — and of storing them in the mind as chunks in the readily reusable form to convey the units of meaning which are often handled as chunks. (The secret of the native learner's facility with the code lies here.) The use of the structural elements becomes habitual to the native learner this way. The second language learner, on the other hand, does not habitualize the use of the code in the form of a great number of oft-used chunks and the use of the structural elements which carry the least meaning and therefore are the most-difficult-to-learn items of the code. This is so because language, any language, being a code for conveying meaning, is best tackled by a learner as units representing units of meaning.

The second language learner stands in need of deliberately provided help in acquiring a certain degree of automaticity in the correct production of a great many sentence-level chunks of the target code before he is ready to imbibe some of these as the linguistic representations of certain oft-encountered units of meaning. The sentence-
level units will be stored in the learner's mind only as representations of meaning, and therefore, the learner will soon lose his formal understanding of these unless they are soon imbibed as representations of meaning. In such activity the focus of attention will have to stay on the units of meaning, and therefore, a certain degree of automaticity in the correct production of the code is a prerequisite, so that attention may be shifted from the code to the meaning. Whereas the native learner naturally acquires this automaticity with the code, the second language learner has to be artificially helped in the acquisition of an adequate degree of the same.

The second language learner then proceeds to internalize a good enough number of sentence-level code-meaning links as the basis from which he can take off into the free use of the language. Therefore, this study prescribes certain 'preliminary steps' for establishing the knowledge for the correct production of the code and then 'advanced steps' to habitualize a good enough number of basic sentence-level code-meaning links.

The strategy of remediation proposed by this study thus recommends activities for conscious learning and then habitualization of the use of rules concerning the production
of the code and then further activities for the internalization of specific sentence-level units of the code as representations of specific units of meaning. This study firmly believes that fluency in the use of the target language is the final and not the immediate goal to be achieved; it believes in the error-free acquisition of a basic language corpus as the immediate goal, and then in the gradual progress towards fluency through the increasingly freer use of the competence that was originally acquired through manipulated tasks. The conviction, in other words, is that, wherever fluency is considered as the immediate goal, errors become fossilized and never (in most cases) get eradicated; teachers often fight a losing battle (and give up in despair) against errors that exhibit an invincible determination to stay. The strategy recommended by this study, on the other hand, visualizes an (almost completely) error-free, slow, but steady progress towards fluency; it does not believe in the rapid 'mastery' of communication through the use of a pidgin as it seems to be advocated by the 'communicationists'.

It has been possible only to make a theoretical prescription of the various steps in the strategy, because only a longitudinal study would be able to practically
demonstrate the working of the whole of such a strategy. In a sample try-out the initial steps of the mastery-learning of (the application of) a selected few rules of the code have been demonstrated. It is hypothesized that through similar steps an adequate knowledge of the code would be cumulatively built up as a basis for the later sentence-level code-meaning linking activities, and that the code-meaning linking activities attempted afterwards would bring the learners to the readiness for using the language for communication. The strategy of remediation is thus completely laid out — theoretically — though only the initial steps have been practically demonstrated.

The partial try-out proved successful in that it supported that part of the hypotheses to which it was related. The rest of the strategy remains in the form of the theoretical prescription: there will have to be further experiments to prove the validity of the later steps in the proposed strategy. The study draws itself to a close by making recommendations for such further experiments.

Chapter V describes the experiment that validated the initial steps of the strategy of remediation proposed by this study, and Chapter VI puts forward the conclusions arrived at through this experiment.