6 The curricular site – a critical reconstruction

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study in the form of critical reconstruction of the curricular site. The critical reconstruction is informed by concepts like empowerment of the participants and reflective theorising by the researcher borrowed from the emancipatory orientation to curriculum theorising (Section 2.7.3). In this chapter, an attempt is made at conceptualising the ESL curriculum in the autonomous college by critically interpreting the micro and macro level themes discussed in the previous chapters.

However, before getting down to the interpretation, it would be helpful to clarify the term findings as used in this study. Here, findings refer to the outcome of critical reflection on the curricular themes. Findings aim to contribute to the broad area of curriculum theorising in ESL by providing critical insights into some the crucial themes identified in the study. It is hoped that such a reconstruction will bring to the fore some of the tacit dimensions related to process of knowledge and control as understood in the context of ESL curriculum in the autonomous college.
This chapter also discusses some of the problems faced during the process of conducting ethnographic inquiry. It closes with suggestions for further research.

6.2 Scheme for critical interpretation

In this section, an attempt is made at interpreting the micro and macro level themes by adopting a broad educational perspective. The process followed here was two-fold: at first certain crucial themes were identified, subsequently, these themes were reflected upon by relating them to broad educational issues like goals of education, the process of knowledge creation, the role of sociohistorical context and of course the role of teachers and learners in decision making processes. For convenience of presentation, I have classified my discussion into three headings namely: the context, the content and the participants (Section 2.4.1). It may be suggested that the effort at critical interpretation can be better appreciated, by revisiting the discussion on knowledge and control (Section 2.11) and a discussion on curricular orientations (Section 2.7).

6.3 The context

The term context as applied in the study was already defined in the previous chapters. In this section, I shall discuss themes related to the
context of autonomous college. My objective is to place the themes in the broad sociohistorical matrix of implementing a top-down model of curricular change and examine the resultant issues. The context has been critically analysed in terms of the following themes: the criteria for change, catalyst for change, the role of Board of Studies, the issue of workload and the need for dynamic leadership. Let me start by quoting a few lines from the prospectus of the college. According to the prospectus,

Some of the efforts made in this direction focus on encouraging students to think clearly, critically and creatively and to express themselves fearlessly. (page 2)

The prospectus states the above point while mentioning the academic and social objectives of autonomous status. Perceptibly, one can find a close correlation suggested here in terms of 'clear thought' and 'free expression' that could be linked to the languages classes. In my opinion, the goal of clear thinking and fearless expression could be closely tied to the objectives of ESL curriculum, as language classes could be the best forum for teaching these skills. When I say this, my intention is to demonstrate the unique advantage shared by language classes in general and ESL in particular, as a means of realising one of the goals of autonomy. Regrettably, the decision makers seem to have restricted themselves to preparing students for competitive exams and comprehend
a few prose and poetry extracts as exemplified in the prescribed textbooks. To follow up with the review of the educational goals as stated in the prospectus, I shall delve on the next important aspect namely the criteria for change in the context of the autonomous college.

6.3.1 Criteria for change

In the context of the college, it may be noted that the issue of objectives of teaching ESL (the two-year General English course) is directly linked with the pattern of evaluation that is considered to be most relevant and useful (see the sample questions in Appendix 4). As observed in Section (4.11), the main objective of General English while effecting the change of syllabus was guided more by looking at "the testing pattern based on the competitive exams", as claimed by T1 and T2. The pattern of English in competitive exams also played a crucial role in deciding upon "the percentage of language and the percentage of text", in designing the syllabus. This is stated very clearly in the syllabus document (Section 4.10.3).

Reformulating the objectives, in other words, signifies the changing of syllabus by balancing the text-based components and the language-
based components, wherein the former include a collection of prose and poetry units from various anthologies and the latter refers to exercises in language development. This gets reinforced by T1, as she puts it, while describing the rationale for the scheme of question paper, "text-based questions are more of recollection from the textbook and language based are more of creative use of language, application of skills" (Section 4.18).

It is possible to justify the rationale for this change by considering the socio-political factors that operate in redefining the role of ESL in countries like India. Viewed from this perspective, the objectives formulated in this college seem to be quite in tune with the redefinition of English in the neo-colonial world (Spivak 1991). The new role of English has more to do with the scientific and technological developments in the USA than with its earlier status as a language of cultural refinement with strong colonial overtones (Sunder Rajan 1992). The functional significance of ESL as implied in this perspective posits the study of English as an International Language, a tool of global communication and a means for material prosperity (Pennycook 1994). To a great extent, the policy statements at the tertiary level (Appendix 6) reinforce the functional aspects of English as envisaged by the communicative methods. "The changing trends in ELT", as mentioned in the syllabus
document also alludes to the current paradigm of teaching language as communication (Widdowson 1978, 1979, Rossner and Bolitho 1990). The present status of English as a language for the competitive examinations suggests broad socio-economic implications. When English is regarded as a passport to social mobility and materialistic objectives, it is difficult to define its role. Spivak brings this out very succinctly, when she says,

Because the nature of neocolonialism was economic rather than territorial or cultural that the production of knowledge within neocolonialism seems to have a subtler role and it is much harder to pin down. It is not just colonialism over again (1991: 156).

This calls for a thorough study of the role of English in India in present circumstances and its implications for teaching ESL. Perhaps it may multiple levels and types of course to cater to the wide ranging needs of the learners.

However, granting that the objective of changing the examination pattern is a valid proposition in itself, it could be argued that the consequent changes in methods and teaching materials leaves a lot to be desired. It needs to be re-emphasised that in the absence of any systematic exercise to understand the educational needs of the students, the college seems to project ‘language components’ as perceived need
from the point of view of students. Of course, this decision may be in concurrence with the broad goals of learning English in the context of global economy but when it comes to realising these goals, it seems to have a done a wee bit about preparing the teachers to work towards achieving these goals. For the teachers the extra effort required to prepare for these language classes remained as a question of increased workload, perhaps inadequately compensated for. Alternatively, if the teachers were sensitised to the advantages of autonomy, their sense of ownership would have lessened the burden of autonomy.

This brings us to the issue of systematic involvement of decision makers, primarily teachers and learners in taking ownership of educational changes and striving to realise them successfully. Since in the present context, the learners had hardly any say in decisions and teachers too were ruled by the dictates of the Board of Studies, it may be gathered that they are still dependent on these bodies. This a deeper analysis of the role of Board of Studies in the changed framework for decision-making.
6.3.2 The role of the Board of Studies

It is not difficult for us to speculate on why the Board of Studies still plays an important role in influencing decision-making. Arguably, the powers invested with these members could easily hamper the freedom provided by autonomy. Thus, the relative decentralization of powers loses its meaning with the scope for the high-handedness of the members. An instance of this possibility is already provided in Section (4.18.1).

In the preceding chapters, it is also observed that almost all the teachers had several negative views about the second year textbook which was selected under the pressure exerted by the Board of Studies (Section 4.19). During the course of my inquiry, it was noted that although the book was ill suited, it had not been changed. When enquired if such a change was irreversible, the teachers said that every textbook is prescribed for a certain period of time and it cannot be changed before the completion of that duration.

In an autonomous situation this seemed quite paradoxical because the teachers, in this context, were fairly free to make any number of changes to the textbook. However, when I probed this issue further, T1
revealed the actual problems in changing the problematic textbook. She said that even if they wanted to change the book for genuine reasons, they would be giving wrong signals to the members of the Board of Studies. According to her, these members would presumably misinterpret the need for change as an excuse for cutting down the portions. When this view of T1 was juxtaposed with her criteria for selecting the books, a hidden dimension is suggested. Apparently, T1's reluctance to change the problematic textbook stems from the fact that the book was accepted under the pressure of the members of the Board. Perhaps, she did not want to take the initiative of changing it as she would be going against the wishes of the Board and this would affect her relationship with the authorities (Appendix 5).

In the light of the emerging insights, the aspect of stipulated period of prescription of the textbook could also be further analysed. The mandatory period of prescribing a textbook could be for purposes like studying the suitability of the books by using it for the whole academic term. Such a stipulation could be applicable when the university prescribes the book and validates its decision testing the contents of the book in several colleges. However, in autonomous colleges such a
practice could have been done away with, as there is scope for changes the books if they not found suitable and justifying the reasons for change.

6.3.3 Catalyst for change

The issue of making changes to the syllabus and the textbooks could also be interpreted by evoking the nature and role of the catalyst for change in the context of the autonomous college. This brings me to aspects like who triggers off the change, who motivates and who decides on the best options. Admitting the fact that, the status of autonomy signifies a change from the earlier status of being an affiliated college wherein all the decision-making powers were vested with the university, it is still difficult to perceive the curricular site as an autonomous entity. Perhaps, this has to do with the way in which autonomy was thrust upon the teachers without adequate guidance on using the freedom and sharing responsibility. It would be to look back and ask if the teachers were prepared to accept and manage this change. Going by what the teachers had to say about their experiences with autonomy, it becomes clear that it is difficult to appreciate the concept of autonomy in the absence of any formal induction into it.
Put differently, in the case of this college the catalyst for change (autonomy) was an external source. As autonomy was conferred by the governmental agency on the basis of certain parameters and preconditions, the teachers could only perceive it as a privilege with several drawbacks. Thus, they failed to explore the challenges if offered if they had understood their new roles and responsibilities.

It may be further argued that the educational appeal of the concept of autonomy would have been better appreciated if the teachers are prepared to realise its potential and make use of it for empowering themselves. In the absence of such an orientation to accept the changes ensuing from the autonomous status once can identify constraints emerging from their attitudes and perceptions. This is amply demonstrated in the inability of teachers to shoulder more responsibility as observed in the instances of teaching language classes that required extra effort and dedication (Section 4.13.2). I strongly feel that significant efforts should have been made at educating, inspiring and motivating the teachers to improve the quality of teaching by perceiving autonomy as an opportunity to meet the requirements of the students in a just and sound manner.
6.3.4 Issue of workload

As discussed earlier, the fear of extra work could be alleviated by instilling a great sense of ownership. Perhaps if the efforts of the teachers were recognised and rewarded aptly by providing incentives for exceptional performance, there would have been a considerable change in their attitude towards additional work. As a team they would have ventured to take more risks and resisted faithful implementation of the orders from Board of Studies. Essentially, such a change in attitude is what strengthens the drive to perceive teaching of ESL differently.

6.3.5 The issue of dynamic leadership

This issue was raised by T3 in the context of reflections on the textbooks. Although the opinions expressed by her are purely personal. She makes a relevant point when she says that autonomy would be "meaningless in the absence of dynamic leadership." Laying more stress on this point she asserts that autonomy makes sense if there are people with a vision, "if someone dynamic is at the helm of affairs", otherwise she feels that they "should scrap autonomy and go back to the university." She also brings in issues related to ego, lack of motivation to innovate and hints at the apparent sense of diffidence that can be felt in
the views of T1. In contrast to the views of T3, the inability to bring in innovative practices, according to T1, are attributed to the amount of extra work that is thrust on them as a result of autonomy. Nevertheless, the problem of workload is not considered to be so grave by other teachers. To a large extent, it was observed that the Head of the department was more resistant to change her conventional notions of teaching General English than other teachers. On various occasions, she expressed her preference for tried and tested methods and proven strategies when it came to addressing various pedagogic issues.

6.4 The content

The significance attached to studying the prescribed content implies a certain, accepted view of how knowledge should be acquired and how teaching-learning should happen in the classroom. Following are the themes that get analysed under this section: scope for curricular change, hurdles to change, implications of change on teaching and the politics of textbook prescription. To begin with I shall discuss the scope and rationale for making curricular changes.
6.4.1 Scope for curricular change

The study has shown that as a result of autonomy several changes were made in the General English syllabus. But these changes were in the form of revisions made to the earlier syllabus, as the teachers felt that they were not confident at attempting any radical changes. While reflecting on the curricular changes, T1 does not conceal her sense of pride when she says that they were given the 'privilege' of decision making, when she says "ours being an autonomous college, we have this privilege of decision making... we were just reviewing the syllabus." But the basis on which the change was effected demands a crucial consideration. Note the usage of the term 'review' here, it is not an evaluation or a scrutiny of any formal kind that became the basis for change, but a 'review' which would have served as a handy adhoc tool to evaluate the existing syllabus.

Moreover T1, who claims that the major change was with regard to the question paper and not the textbook, seems to be grounding her rationale for change in terms of the dichotomous view of content (textbook) and language (skills). According to her, this shift also required a corresponding shift in the 'testing pattern' wherein the 'language items' were given more importance. To base this kind of rationale on an
ambiguous dichotomy like text and language and in addition to it, to select 'preparation for competitive exams' as a goal implies a narrow approach to teaching English.

It was noticed in the previous chapter that the notions teaching language through literature was considered to overcome some of the methodological constraints as perceived in the context of ESL in India, particularly at the tertiary level (Section 5.8.2) When viewed from a historical perspective, it can be seen that all the changes that were effected at the national level too, were reforms recommending particular sets of teaching materials and methods. The suggestions made by the Syllabus Reform (1977) and the CDC (1989) exemplify an effort at incorporating the recent developments in the broader field of ELT. Showing a striking semblance with the previous reforms at the national level, in the context of this college, the syllabus was revised in order to incorporate the recent developments in ESL pedagogy. This brought in a shift of emphasis from teaching of content to teaching of language skills. But a close examination of the textbooks teaching strategies do not seem to do justice to this goal, as described in Sections (4.12 and 4.14).
6.4.2 Hurdles to change

The reluctance to bring in radical changes is an issue that needs further examination. A host of reasons emerge as plausible constraints in this direction. First, it had to do with the decision to limit the scope of reforms to changing the pattern of question paper in the examination. Second, the self-imposed constraint of following all the norms laid down by the university even when they are not required to do so. Third, the apparent lack of dynamism and the will to innovate and extend the scope of the ESL classroom to make it meaningful and relevant. Fourth, there is a need to consider the fact that the size of a class in the Indian context is definitely larger when compared with the western classrooms. This makes it difficult for the teachers to use the strategies developed in other contexts. An awareness to this extent should make the teachers realize the need to retain the lecture method and enrich it with other ways of sustaining the interest of the students. Fifth, the problem of workload and the absence of monetary incentives are certainly related to the issue of motivation and performance of the teachers, but this problem, as shown in the study, seems to invite greater attention than other academic issues.

Viewed broadly, to a considerable extent, the apparent reluctance to take up radical innovations in English in order to enhance its social
relevance stems from the present trend of devaluing humanities and particularly English, in all the regular streams of undergraduate courses. This trend is generally attributed to the growing popularity of professional courses in Engineering and Medical Sciences. The irony of this situation is clearly brought out in the study. This is manifested in the students' resistance to the English classes in the present form even as they voice out the need to attend these classes and their expectations from these classes are voiced in very specific terms (Sections 4.14, 4.16 and 4.17).

It could be gathered from the foregoing discussion that the linguistic requirements of the present generation of students need to be worked out with a different set of parameters that suit the changing sociocultural realities. Perhaps the enhanced relevance of English as a tool of global communication demands a thorough transformation of its role. Hence, no amount of cosmetic changes would make the syllabus socially useful and productive.

I shall now re-examine the decision to change the syllabus and its implications on the content of teaching. The study reveals that the contents represented by the textbooks play a very crucial role, as asserted by the teachers and students. It may also be mentioned that the process
of deciding on the content implies the process of selecting the corpus of knowledge or skills that gets privileged in a particular cultural context.

The classroom is the place where the textbook gets interpreted by teachers and students. The interaction in the classroom as a result of the textbook infuses it with life and activity. However, when the textbook itself is problematic the teachers are called upon to put in extra effort to sustain the attention of the students by engaging them in useful activities. As noted in classroom observation reports (Section 4.12), we find that the teachers try out various strategies while planning, teaching and reflecting on their own teaching. The Teacher Reports (Section 4.15) bear ample testimony to the fact that improvising comes in almost naturally while teaching. For example T2’s contextualisation of the poem Death shows how flexibility in planning allowed her to accommodate a poem that suited the then circumstances.

Thus, one finds a considerable difference of focus in planning as it assumes different priorities for teachers – T1 plans to generate ideas, T4 plans the language exercises but T3 does not find a need for planning when she takes a General English class. However, teaching method used in the classroom, are more or less the same in the case of all the
teachers. In most of the classes the teachers use the lecture method due to the size of the class. This involves reading aloud, explaining, paraphrasing and summarizing the prose or the poetry unit (Section 4.15).

Despite the efforts made in this direction, the students almost unanimously find that most of the classes are invariably teacher-centered (Section 4.14, 4.17). This is because they are rarely given a chance to voice their opinions by way of interacting with the textbook. As a matter of fact, they seem to enjoy those classes where the teachers elicited their reactions, valued their opinions and made them feel a part of the class. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the exercises listed in the textbooks need to be supplemented with other relevant and useful language activities like debates, seminar presentations, sharpening of communication skills etc, which would help the students in their professional lives (Section 4.17).

Though the students express the need to have discussions and activities that would "help them carry on with their lives", they are well aware of the fact that the weak students may not be able to participate in such activities and this may create problems for the teacher. This shows
that the students are also concerned about their peers in the classroom (Appendix 5 – Student Interviews).

6.4.3 The textbook – politics of prescription

In regard to the textbooks as a means of realizing the objectives listed in the syllabus, two important points could be raised: one, the criteria for choosing a particular set of books and two, the choice of the textbooks and its consistency with the goals listed in the syllabus. First, let us recapitulate briefly the criteria that were adopted in selecting the books. While T1 says that the textbooks were selected in consultation with her colleagues “on the basis of availability” of suitable books, T3, who joined the college after the decisions were made asserts that the textbooks were decided by the head of the department (i.e., T1). Not only are these two views in conflict with each other, we find another interesting aspect of deciding on the textbooks when T2 reflecting on the second year book, says

*Spectrum* (the second year book) was proposed and accepted by the Board of Studies … really we didn’t have much of a say in that … there was a lot of subtle pressure so we went ahead and accepted it… they were senior members, they had helped us out in various ways… in retrospect we discovered that it (the book) was not up to the mark… (Appendix 5).
It is interesting to note that this fact about decision making is revealed by T2, who is relatively junior to T1 and who had no hesitance in divulging this inside factor which was scrupulously withheld by T1 when she overly emphasised on the availability criteria.

That fact that they had to oblige some of the senior members of the Board clearly hints at the extra-academic compulsions under which the decisions were made. By yielding to the pressure in this matter, the teachers may have certainly satisfied their seniors, but at a very heavy cost, because, this is the book that has been found problematic by almost all the teachers and the students. Thus, the compromise on quality of teaching materials emerges very strongly as one of the crucial issues which could be taken up for further discussion (Section 6.5.3).

Having had a glimpse into the 'inside story' of the politics of prescribing a textbook, it is easier to understand the frustration experienced by teachers and students while dealing with this book. The sense of dissatisfaction with the contents of this book is amply represented by the students when they find that most of the units are either too simple or awfully uninteresting (Section 4.16). The teachers also
express their 'regret' at accepting a book which has not been read thoroughly from the teacher's viewpoint and which has a major cultural gap (Section 4.18.1).

T2, for instance, appears to be firm in her ideas as to what would suit the needs of the students when she says that “the choice of text could be made more topical and socially relevant”, by including “contemporary writing by women which may be more relevant to girls.” Agreeing with her, T3 feels that the textbooks should have “something which is in tune with the times, which a student can relate to... the vocabulary in the books is antiquated (with reference to the first year book)...” T4 seems to strengthen the argument when she says

Lessons in the second year are very much below the standards ... some phrases in the first year book are alien to our country considering our cultural background... essays by Nehru cannot hold the students for long (Appendix 5 - Teacher Interviews).

This brings in the issue of content in the General English textbooks. It was evident that the students' perceptions about the textbook stemmed from their dissatisfaction with the content of the books. In fact, the inappropriateness of content from the point of view of the students age,
interest and future needs finds an eloquent expression when one of the science students says,

I feel the degree level textbook is just not existing, why can't we have stories where human relations are shown... (Appendix 5 - Student Interviews)

Certainly, stories dealing with human relations could form a substantial part of the textbook, but what is more engaging is the comment regarding the 'degree level textbook', perhaps, the student is right when she says that such a book is yet to be written or published. Equally insightful is the view expressed by another student when she says that "they should get out of the idea that they should have lessons, we can have articles from newspapers, speeches..." (Appendix 5). The students in Group 4 (Appendix 5) agree with their peers when they say that "selection of topics, which are now very philosophical should actually be more contemporary, something that they can relate to." If considered seriously opinions such as these could contribute towards selecting the right book to suit the level of the students.

It may also be considered that the students find that some of the lessons had already been taught in their higher secondary level textbooks.
It was clear that their expectations from the current syllabus was prepare them to face the challenges at workplace communication and address the needs of improving their LSRW skills.

6.5 Roles of the participants

In this section, I shall discuss the role of the participants by highlighting teacher and learner roles, the process of knowledge creation and subject formation.

6.5.1 Teachers

As a general observation, it could be said that the teachers felt secure and comfortable to perform the role of implementers of decisions. Factors such as, their ignorance about the using autonomy to their advantage and inability to come out of the conventional mindset can be directly correlated with related issues like a certain kind of cynicism and resultant lack of initiative to do things differently. Even a cursory study of these factors reveals the fact that teachers themselves, knowingly or unknowingly add to the devaluing of significance of ESL at tertiary level education.
When T1 for instance, mentioned that the students would be compared with the other students from non-autonomous colleges, it seemed as if the purpose of conferring autonomy was not being interpreted properly by the teachers. The students corroborated this opinion of T1 by saying that the marks they got in their final exams were much lower than that of the other students. In fact, they voiced their displeasure at the idea of having an external examiner who had unrealistically ‘higher expectations’ from them. They felt that it would be better if the practice of external examiner was done away with.

6.5.2 Students

In contrast to the teachers, the students did not have a role in the decision-making processes. Hence, their perceptions of objectives of learning English can be gathered by studying their expectations from the General English classes. For example, some of the students belonging to the science faculty prefer to view their English classes as a “welcome break” from other optional classes, where they can “relax” and have lighter units in their textbooks (Section 4.14). There are some others who feel that English classes could be used for “personality development” and in developing critical skills by way of thinking and reflecting on socially
relevant issues (Section 4.16). As against these expectations the commerce students express their preference for meeting their future professional requirements through the English classes (Section 4.17).

Looking back at the students’ expectations it may be said that the goal of language improvement certainly finds a place in their conceptions of objectives of learning, although it is expressed in different ways. Perhaps, if their views were elicited and considered seriously it would have helped the teachers in at least two ways: one, the relevance of English classes could be enhanced by catering to their needs and two, the resistance to English could have been minimized by seeking their cooperation in making the classes useful, interesting and enjoyable (Section 4.17).

Questioning the sanctity of lesson and the didactic element in it, the students strongly feel that English should be treated as a language and not a subject. Here subject would refer to content based optional subjects like Economics, Biology or Chemistry. English should provide them the necessary break hence they would not like to have heavy content (topics related to philosophy) that require explanation (Section 4.17). Thus
students seem to be disillusioned with the way in which English is taught and the textbooks prescribed for study.

The students' expectations seem to be emanating from the changing role of English in the wake of globalisation. Their wish to learn the language as communication skills and acquire functional knowledge is justified by the fact that a good command over English will take them through any entrance test for higher education or enhance their prospects in the job market (Section 4.17).

Quite contrary to these expectations from English (GE) classes as expressed by the students, in the context of the curricular site ESL seems to have got devalued in the process of privileging literature over language. (Appendix 5)

This devaluing certainly has an impact on the students' attitude towards English classes, perhaps this could be the reason behind their lack of interest. The noise in the classroom could be because of the fact that a large number of students did not find value in attending the ESL classes. (Appendix 5)
6.5.3 Process of knowledge creation

The process of knowledge creation depends on the view of education adopted by the college. Though the prospectus states lofty (section 4.10.1) goals, there seems to be a wide gap between the statement of goals and implementation. As we have seen in earlier sections, in reality, there is hardly any scope for students to express themselves. The teachers too seemed to have built invisible walls around themselves by narrowly defining the scope of autonomy (Appendix 5). If on the one hand, students are not given a chance to participate in decision making, on the other, teachers themselves seem to close down options to negotiate by complying with the dictates of higher ups. Thus, the process of knowledge creation, which ideally should have involved teachers and students as key participants, is now an unquestioned prerogative of the Board of Studies.

The “source of knowledge creation”, signified by the prescribed textbook is controlled by external authorities like the Board of Studies members who have their personal interests in getting a particular book prescribed for study. The students, who are the victims of flawed decision-making processes, remain mute participants as they do not have opportunities to express their views and offer suggestions. In the absence of a dialogical process, the students end up ‘absorbing’ the knowledge
thus transmitted unwittingly contribute to the continuation of the prevailing state of affairs.

6.5.4 Subject formation

Going by the discussion so far, it may be stated with greater degree of certitude that autonomy, when sponsored by the government, has an overt interest in preserving the status quo by forming subjects who adhere to the norms laid down by the educational authorities.

Generally, in any state sponsored educational endeavour the main goal of education would be to produce ‘subjects’ who conform to the dictates of the state and remain at the receiving end. The content is carefully selected keeping in mind the aims of education, in most cases such course content is expected to be imbibed by the students. Adhering to the conventional role of a college teacher, the teachers are expected to teach the lesson and conduct tests. Neither the students nor the teachers have a role to play in decision-making processes.

In striking contrast, the autonomous situation suggests an educational context where apparently, the participants have an opportunity to exercise control over the state of affairs. At the same time it should also
be noted that since autonomy was conferred by the government, it is expected to primarily serve the interests of the state. Freedom seems to be shallow. The system seems to have several in-built mechanisms that control the interests of the state. If the participants were not aware of the hidden messages it implies that they lend themselves to be a party to the status quo by overlooking opportunities for no empowerment.

6.6 Problems faced during the fieldwork

The problems encountered in the study, especially in the course of conducting the fieldwork require a brief elucidation. It may be noted that problems faced while briefing the teachers and students and while seeking permission have already been discussed in Sections 4.7 and 4.8. This apart, there were other problems like handling conflicting opinions, attitudes of the participants towards the researcher and most importantly, the paucity of research in the area of curriculum and ethnography. The following sub-sections discuss the subtleties involved in dealing with these problematic issues.
6.6.1 Handling sensitive issues

One of the crucial problems faced during the study emanates from the conflictual relationship among the teachers. In particular, the process of interviewing the teachers brought in some discordant views and ego clashes between the teachers. For instance, most of the points made by T3 with regard to the selection of textbooks and specifically, the scope of autonomy for undertaking innovative projects, stand in sharp contrast to the views expressed by T1 while reflecting on the same issue.

Similarly, in another context, when T1 was invited to share her experiences, she came out openly with some statements that were supposedly consensual. It was also noticed that the issue of workload was not regarded as a serious problem by all the teachers, in fact T4 showed her awareness regarding the nature of work involved in an autonomous college. However, the most problematic situation was when T2 unwittingly revealed the tacit dimensions of prescribing the second year textbook. After knowing the inside factors that were disclosed by T2 I felt that it was necessary for me to seek clarification on these issues from T1. But I restrained myself from doing so because this would not have served any purpose. Moreover, disclosing such conflicting statements
would have been a futile exercise as it would have aggravated the apparent sense of unease that prevailed among some teachers.

Thus, handling these situations needed some amount of tact and neutrality. It was imperative that I did not take sides while interacting with teachers or students. In such situations my role was limited to that of an 'objective hearer' whose job was to simply record the views however controversial they were. This was also necessary because of the ethical aspect involved in assuring the participants with regard to the maintenance of confidentiality.

6.6.2 Attitudes towards the researcher

While acknowledging the fact that without the cooperation of the teachers and students this study would not have been possible, it may pointed out that the trajectory of this research had its share of hurdles. The obstacles I encountered were mostly attitudinal in nature as they emanated from the teachers' unawareness about the rigour and discipline required in doing research in education. Except T4: all the others had no idea whatsoever about the methodological factors that were crucial to any project in the field of education.
Perhaps this was the reason for their cynicism and lack of interest in issues that were not of immediate relevance to them. To cite an example, the amount of interest shown by teachers was noticeably greater when issues related to their pay-scales were raised than when issues emerging from pedagogy were discussed. Comparatively, the students' attitude was very positive towards the researcher, they even hoped that their textbooks would change after their perceptions are put across to the concerned authorities.

6.6.3 Paucity of research

The scarcity of research in the field of ethnography in education in India, particularly in the field of curriculum studies, was a major impediment at the level of designing the study. With no precedence to fall back on, I had to exercise utmost caution in tackling issues related to building up empirical rigour. Besides, the newness of the framework needed a detailed explication as described in chapter 3. Certainly, had there been more studies in seeking an ethnographic orientation to curriculum studies the present research would have gained tremendously from the earlier insights. It was on account of this factor that the study sought guidance from other related areas of research. This has been discussed in section 3.6.
6.7 Suggestions for further research

As stated in the beginning of this chapter this study uses the term *findings* in a different sense to refer to the outcome of critical reflection on the curricular themes (Section 6.1). This is because the study did not have any predefined hypothesis to prove for any specific case to be validated. It may also be noted that the presentation of findings does not indicate that the research has reached its logical conclusion. In fact, this chapter throws up several issues for further inquiry, suggesting new beginnings and new approaches. Perhaps, due to some operational constraints the study had to limit itself to a handful of curricular concerns (Section 1.4). There could several interesting areas of concern that can prompt future studies in similar direction.

As suggested in the foregoing paragraph there is a need to undertake more projects in exploring an ethnographic perspective for curriculum studies. Although ethnography has been accepted as a viable mode of studying the language classroom for the purpose of examining the interaction that takes place in the classroom, it has not yet found its way into other aspects of the curriculum.
Another plausible area of research suggested by the study relates to the dominance of the Applied Linguistic paradigm in the context of second language education. A sociopolitical study of this paradigm as the disciplinary base of ESL could generate illuminating insights into the cultural politics (Pennycook 1994) of ESL in India.

Alternatively, the plausibility of a critical ethnographic approach to teacher empowerment could also become a subject of empirical study. Adopting this framework the teachers could study their everyday experiences in terms of the broad sociopolitical factors that get are tacitly legitimized in their profession. An unveiling of these issues would empower the teachers by making them more aware of the disparities in society that are reflected in an educational setting.

Furthermore, the concept of autonomy for colleges at the tertiary level could become a viable topic for research. As observed in the present study (see also Appendix 7), autonomous colleges are fraught with several problems. The very idea of privileging some colleges by giving them special rights has come under severe criticism as it promotes specious elitism and unhealthy hierarchy among other colleges.
Apart from these demerits, another interesting aspect could be probed further. This relates to the confusion surrounding the goals of autonomy. Here, two important questions could be taken up for inquiry: one, does the grant of autonomy merely devolve the university of its responsibility towards the proliferation of colleges in India, and two, how does the university account for freedom given to autonomous colleges by allowing to offer ‘socially relevant courses’ which may in fact cater to the upper strata of society. An elucidation of issues such as these is carried in the newspapers clippings included in Appendix 7.

6.8 Drawing together

This chapter discussed some of the micro and macro level issues emerging from the study. The framing of the issues was done on the basis of the views expressed by the teachers and learners on the curricular site as analysed in chapters 4 and 5. These issues pertained to various domains of curricular decision making in the context of the autonomous college. Besides a critical interpretation of issues such as formulation of objectives of ESL, the politics of prescribing the textbook and the inherent paradox in the granting of autonomy to colleges, this chapter also described the problems faced during the study. The discussion is wrapped up by suggesting areas for further research.