1 Introduction to the study

1.1 Background to the study

The study is an outcome of my efforts at seeking alternative ways of studying the ESL curriculum at the tertiary level. Having taught and researched ESL for a considerable period, I began to perceive the need to conceptualise the issues differently, by looking beyond the framework of Applied Linguistics. It may be mentioned that ESL had traditionally depended on the discipline of Applied Linguistics for providing a theoretical base for language teaching. In my opinion, such reliance on a linguistic discipline had engendered a narrow perspective to view ESL related issues. For instance, by applying the principles of sociolinguistics, one tended to seek answers to a host of questions in teaching and learning ESL. Often pedagogic in nature, such questions are generally aimed at finding solutions to immediate concerns of the classroom.

Though this approach was valued highly for its ability to provide sound teaching methods derived from respective theories of second language learning, arguably, it proved to be wanting in curricular aspects of ESL. In my view, issues emanating from ESL pedagogy were complex in nature, involving a larger, educational agenda, comprising social,
historical and political factors. Hence, they could not be addressed at the level of syllabus design and teaching methodology. One of the ways of attending to this imperative was to overcome the constraints posed by predominantly syllabus-oriented perspective.

This brought me to the field of curriculum studies as a viable paradigm that can be explored for other options to conceptualise ESL. My conviction that by adopting a broad, educational framework we can enrich our understanding of the curricular issues was furthered strengthened when I was able to give my study a curricular focus. Issues such as curricular context, curricular content and the role of participants in shaping curricular experiences, particularly caught my attention and I began to work on a research agenda that comprised two goals: one, understanding and describing the curricular concerns at the tertiary level and two, theorising these concerns in the form of a critical account.

Thus, I decided to locate my research in the curriculum studies framework and explored a suitable research methodology to operationalise it. At this point, I was guided by my interpretation of curriculum as the processes of creating, sharing, experiencing and preserving knowledge in an educational context. This perception is also
linked with my definition of curriculum as a social phenomenon characterised by interplay of three majors factors: the context, the content and the participants. Effectively, curriculum provides the environment for providing learning experiences by considering teachers and learners as key stakeholders in the process. For me, curriculum also signifies the context for providing learning experiences with teachers and learners as key stakeholders. Here, the context is shaped by various social, cultural and historical forces that shape the educational site. In keeping with the goals of research, I opted for naturalistic methods such as ethnography, critical ethnography and critical social inquiry. I made use of qualitative tools namely, participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews and questionnaires to conduct the study.

Having placed the argument for a broader perspective to study ESL curriculum, I shall now mention another motivating factor that prompted this study. It had to do with my interest in understanding the role of teachers and learners in making curricular decisions. I strongly believe that teaching-learning processes can become much-more meaningful and relevant if teachers and learners have control over what they are teaching and learning (content) and how it is being done (methodology). Now, my task was to find an appropriate educational setting where I could find
scope for curricular decision-making at the grassroots level, involving teacher and learners.

Apparently, the context of autonomous college at the tertiary level proved to be the suitable choice. What was interesting about autonomy was its scope for decentralised decision-making, teacher empowerment, student participation and opportunity for curricular innovation. Essentially, the context of autonomous college provided tremendous scope for studying the impact of autonomy on ESL curriculum. It was quite exciting to probe the issues in ESL curriculum by placing them in the context of the autonomous college. Three main issues constituted the areas of focus in the inquiry, namely, the context, the content and the participants. These issues, which in fact, signify of the main themes of the study, emerge from the basic proposition that issues faced in the classroom cannot be resolved merely by probing the events in the immediate context of the classroom and the prescribed context, but they have to be placed in the broader educational context comprising the social and historical factors for acquiring a holistic knowledge.
1.2 Relevance of the study

An obvious justification of carrying out the study lies in the need for perceiving ESL as an educational problem. This implies the necessity to go beyond the current, dominant notions of curriculum theorising and adopt a broader perspective for a holistic conceptualisation. This imperative demands an assiduous effort at identifying critical issues that have major implications for understanding ESL curriculum as it is experienced on the site. In the context of the study, curriculum is regarded as a 'site of struggle' with contesting perceptions of knowledge. It has several stakeholders who strive to participate in the decision-making processes. The dominant view of the knowledge eventually gets prescribed as the content of study.

The present study attempts to identify the micro and macro level issues in ESL curriculum with an intention of studying them using ethnographic tools. It may be noted that not many studies have been carried out on these lines in the Indian ESL context. Moreover, as a novel way of conceptualising ESL, the study may throw new questions that seek new ways of generating curricular knowledge.
1.3 Scope of the study

The scope of the study is limited to understanding and describing the ESL curriculum in the context of an autonomous college. For this purpose, it adopts an eclectic approach to curriculum theorising. The curricular concerns identified at micro and macro levels are theorised using *practical* and *emancipatory* orientations. The study borrows from these orientations, concepts related to practical issues such as the process of decision making, syllabus related negotiations, roles of teachers and learners as key stakeholders and so on. These concepts are helpful in identifying curricular themes at micro and macro levels. From the emancipatory orientation, it adopts the concept of critical reflection in order to reflect on the themes from the broader educational perspective. This is achieved through:

- An ethnographic reconstruction of the curricular site at micro and macro levels by identifying and analysing the themes
- A critical reconstruction of the micro and macro level themes for producing critical curricular knowledge

The study is rendered in the form of an ethnographic critique that incorporates the following features:

- Longitudinal study conducted on the curricular site
- Systematic efforts at thick description
1.4 Limitations

The study was conducted as a part of the requirements of a research programme. Hence, it was operationalised within the constraints of institutional specifications. This made it adhere to certain limitations that are mentioned below:

a. As stated earlier, the study is an attempt at seeking alternative ways of theorising ESL curriculum. The approach suggested here adopts an eclectic methodology by incorporating relevant concepts from ethnography, critical ethnography and critical social inquiry. It may be noted that there could be other ways of theorising adopted a similar framework, but the study restricts itself to using concepts like understanding, critical reflection and thick description.

b. The study signifies an attempt at theorising at the local level. It does not attempt at producing a theory that can be applied universally.

b. Being subjective in nature, it showcases a curricular phenomenon as a unique, context-bound instance; it does
not claim to offer objective insights that can be applied across contexts.

c. Being eclectic in nature, the study can be broadly fitted in the naturalistic paradigm; however, it limits itself to using certain aspects of ethnography, critical ethnography and critical social inquiry as applicable in the overall research design.

d. The study confines itself to General English (GE) curriculum in an autonomous college. GE is interpreted as an instance of ESL at the tertiary level in the Indian context.

1.5 Role of the researcher

In accordance with the requirements of the naturalistic paradigm, the researcher plays an important role in conducting the inquiry on the curricular site.

a. The researcher is like an ethnographer who observes the lifeworld of the college, thickly describes the curricular experiences, and studies them by analysing and interpreting systematically.

b. The researcher collects and generates data by using tools such as participant observation, questionnaires, interviews and discussions.
c. The researcher being the primary instrument, her biases and convictions come into play at various instances. This makes the research non-neutral and subjective.

1.6 A preview of chapters

Given below is a preview of the forthcoming chapters by summarizing the main concerns of each chapter:

Chapter 2: ESL and curriculum studies – a conceptual overview, defines the conceptual contours of the study by delineating issues related to the difference between curriculum and syllabus. It argues for a curriculum studies perspective to theorise ESL curriculum by combining aspects from practical and emancipatory orientations.

Chapter 3: Framework for curriculum theorising, presents the research framework for operationalising the study. It describes the eclectic framework by explaining concepts of ethnography, critical ethnography and critical social inquiry.

Chapter 4: Micro-level reconstruction of the curricular site, provides a thick description of the fieldwork. It describes the micro-level
ESL concerns at the autonomous college, by analysing the data collected through various qualitative tools like observation, questionnaires and interviews.

Chapter 5: Macro-level reconstruction of the curricular site, discusses various macro level issues by highlighting the historical developments regarding ESL in India. It also throws light on sociological issues involved in the imperial design of the curriculum in pre- and post-independence India.

Chapter 6: The curricular site - critical reconstruction, presents the findings of the study by placing the micro level issues in the macro context and analysing them critically. It also offers suggestions for further research.

1.7 Drawing together

As an introduction to the study, this chapter presented the background to the study. It also described the scope, relevance and limitations of the study. The role of the researcher was briefly discussed before moving on to presenting a preview of the forthcoming chapters.

The next chapter presents a conceptual discussion of various issues related to ESL curriculum by positing micro-macro based parameters to obtain a holistic understanding of the curriculum.