

## INTRODUCTION

The New English Syllabus for schools in West Bengal has been a centre of controversy since its introduction in 1984. The syllabus has been attacked principally on three grounds - i) it has drastically shortened the English teaching programme by three to five years, introducing the learners to the language in the junior secondary instead of the primary stage ; ii) it ignores the teaching of grammar ; iii) it does not develop a literary taste in the learners. As such, it is argued, it cannot equip the learners with a reasonable proficiency in the English language.

The controversy rages as angry letters from guardians, language teachers and experts still flood the newspaper columns : the issue has taken even a political turn with pamphlets, posters and agitators' pickets decrying the language policy of the State Government . There is a constant clamour for reinstating English at the primary level. Ever since its introduction, the syllabus has been submerged in a whirlpool of debate, discussion, opinion, counter-opinion and even sheer aspersion. Nearly a century and a half after the introduction of English language teaching in this country, a ground swell is gathering in its favour, however paradoxical the phenomenon might appear to be.

The atmosphere is darkened by the fact that there is an ever-increasing number of expensive and exclusive English medium schools all over the country, run by private or religious foundations. The schools under the Central Board Of Secondary Education, scattered all over the country to provide education

primarily to the children of government employees on transferable jobs, perforce use English in a large measure because of the multi lingual character of the student and the teacher population. But the schools which follow the new syllabus faithfully far outnumber these two categories and cover the majority of the students in our state.

This is one of the reasons why this syllabus has been seen as detrimental to the interests of the majority. The academic argument has always been secondary in this controversy : the split is between those who believe that communication is much more important than a sheer mastery over structures, and those who dismiss the whole point by arguing that without a workable knowledge of grammar, no language can be learnt and no communication is possible. If one group proclaims that the syllabus is 'scientific' and is based on the current theories and experiments in the language teaching world, the dissidents assert that even if the syllabus is 'scientific', it is 'unworkable' in the prevailing classroom situation.

The main distinction of the present syllabus is its adherence to the 'functional-communicative' approach, which, it is claimed, is completely different from the 'structural' approach followed by the previous syllabus. The change in approach is to be related to the changing methods and views in the field of language teaching since the early seventies. There has been a shift of emphasis from rote learning of grammar, from the traditional teacher-centred method of teaching ; instead, learner-initiative has been given prime importance and the cognitive maturity of the learner has been taken into

consideration as a significant factor in the process of learning. It has been argued for quite some time that a late start is no handicap in learning a new language -, rather the powers of reasoning, concept-formation and hypothesizing, all may facilitate learning at the onset of puberty.

But all these remain on the level of theory for the thousands of guardians who observe that in the so-called English-medium schools, English is taught right from the nursery level and used also as the medium of instruction. This leads to the allegation that the government is actually indulging a 'dual policy' and encouraging a 'dual system' in which the urban classes can send their wards to the English medium schools for a sustained exposure to English, while the rural classes cannot take this advantage and have to send their children, willy-nilly, to the government-sponsored schools where English is taught perfunctorily and from a much later stage. This discrepancy has aroused in many a sense of deprivation and added a further dimension to the controversy on the validity and utility of the new syllabus.

Since the syllabus is introduced at the junior secondary level and as there is a large number of drop-outs at the primary level, a sizable section of the population (particularly in the rural areas) leaves school without the least knowledge of English. This has lent an additional support to the demand for reinstating English at the primary level and has been exploited for populist campaign by different political parties.

There is a general agreement on the incompetence in English of the products of this syllabus. The overwhelming

majority of them are found unable to discharge the functions they are expected to, and they are also unable to follow the syllabus of the next stage (Higher Secondary or Preparatory to the University level). Thus, from all corners the present syllabus at the secondary level has been exposed to sharp criticism, bitter aspersion and cynical opinion.

The present study was contemplated against this background of controversy and criticism. All these socio-academic factors provoked us to study the syllabus in detail in its academic aspects. The decision to introduce English at the secondary level is nothing new or revolutionary or retrograde. Most of the other Indian states deferred English teaching to the secondary stage quite some time ago. West Bengal, in fact, was the last to join them. In doing so, the designers of the new syllabus made not only a quantitative change (in terms of time span), but also introduced a qualitatively different approach. The idea was that the method would be so good that it would easily deliver the goods within a shorter time. In confronting this position, some of the questions that occurred to us, and which we tried to explore through our study, were :

Should the span of teaching English be lengthened and should English be reinstated at the primary level ? Is it possible to equip the learners with the requisite skills even if the span is shorter, provided that the course content is well organized ? Does the adoption of a 'functional-communicative' approach necessarily imply a repudiation of the teaching of grammar ? How much of grammar is incorporated in the syllabus and what are the methods applied to introduce grammar ? How

does the syllabus try to develop reading and writing skills ? What are the measures adopted for a vocabulary build-up ? Are they adequate ? How far can the so-called communicative approach develop oral skill in the learners in the prevailing reality ? How far is the adoption of a methodology reflected in the syllabus design and detailing ? Is it followed systematically ? How far is the syllabus workable in our actual classroom situation ?

The answers to these questions could be probed through a wide field-survey, undertaken as a large-scale project, involving well-organized team-work. This was beyond the means of the present study. We decided to attempt a critical analysis of the West Bengal coursebooks (LEARNING ENGLISH, Steps One to Five) published under the new syllabus, setting it against some well-known theoretical frames and following it with some modest attempts at collecting feedback reports to examine the achievements of the syllabus.

We divided the study into three parts, subdivided into eleven chapters. Part I ( THE BACKGROUND ) contains four chapters. The opening chapter ('The Historical Perspective') attempts to provide an outline picture of English language teaching in India since its inception in the eighteenth century. The second chapter ('Current State of Affairs') attempts to describe in a nutshell the changes taking place in English language teaching in the country. It also presents a comparative study of the syllabuses in force in some large tracts of the country, vis-a-vis West Bengal. The third chapter ('The Functional-Communicative Approach') describes the idea that has

West Bengal.

The syllabus of West Bengal has tried to apply a new methodology and a new set of ideas about second language teaching in a very complex situation. The five-year-programme that it has undertaken should have been adequate, but its main drawback lies in the detailed planning of the contents. In the name of a communicative approach, necessary structural practice has often been shunned, and an unrealistic emphasis has been put on oral activity and tasks which are often too demanding for the majority of the students, and often too unmanageable for the majority of the teachers. There is every likelihood of a 'pidgin' English developing, as the errors made during oral interaction may not be rectified by any remedial teaching later, specially because of the large size of the classes. This is sure to be reflected in the 'writing' of the learners, which is planned mostly as a follow-up of oral discussion. The syllabus has not been able to resolve the conflict between 'accuracy' and 'fluency', and does not considerably help the learners to achieve either. Lessons have often been planned haphazardly, no firm line of control running from lesson to lesson and from book to book. Reading content has been sketchy, and repetitive particularly at the elementary stage ; no systematic plan for developing word-power is noticeable ; and there has been a frequent mismatching of 'structures' and 'functions'. These are, in brief, some of the reasons why in spite of a sound theoretical framework, the present syllabus has not been able to win much success during the last ten years. Its weakness is not in its concept, but in the implementation.