

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This study was designed to investigate whether students' scores in reading comprehension tests actually reflect their comprehension. This study also aims to provide insights into the difficulties these second language learners face in making sense of what they read and the strategies they use to overcome these difficulties. This chapter describes the context in which the study was conducted. It provides background information to the study, a description of the research site in which the study was conducted and a profile of the learners who participated in the study. This is followed with a section on the procedures adopted in the data collection.

3.2 Background Information

Before carrying out the study, background information pertaining to the school, the subjects involved and the English language learning context in the school was collected. The following sections summarise the information obtained.

3.2.1 The School

This study was conducted in a secondary school in the state of Negri Sembilan. This school is new compared to other well-established ones within the district. Starting out with an enrolment of only 112 Form One students and a teaching staff of 11 teachers in the year 2000, it now has 38 teachers and 517 students from Form One to Form Five. Of this number, 119 are in three Form One classes, 118 in four Form Two classes, 142 in five Form Three classes, 82 in three

Form Four classes and 56 in two Form Five classes. The students mostly come from the nearby kampungs and housing estates.

Out of the 38 teaching staff in the school, 5 teachers teach the English language. Two of these teachers possess formal qualifications to teach English as a Second Language (TESL) and one teacher holds qualifications in Modern Languages. The remaining two teachers did their tertiary education overseas with a minor in TESL. They have been teaching English for a number of years. In 2002, the pioneer batch of students from 2000 sat for the PMR. At 82.5% passes, English ranked 8th out of the 9 subjects the students sat for. The first batch of SPM students obtained 64.3% passes in English, ranking 13th out of 18 subjects. From these results, it is obvious that English is one of the weakest subjects of the students of the school.

3.2.2 The Class

The students' placement in a particular class in this school is based on their performance in the final assessment of the year. The class involved in this study is the top Form Three class comprising 30 students of Malay descent. They communicate mainly in Bahasa Melayu, their first language. Informal discussions with these students revealed that they only use English when they have to, which is during English language classes. They seem to comprehend spoken English fairly well but are reluctant to speak in English. In the last public examination these students sat for, the UPSR at the end of Year Six in primary school, 5 of these students scored As in English while 15 scored Bs, 7 scored Cs, 1 scored D and 1

scored E. At the point when this study was conducted, they had been taught English for at least eight and a half years.

3.2.3 The Key Informants

For this study, 6 informants were identified from the class for the purpose of obtaining a more comprehensive perspective of the strategies they use in reading. These 6 students comprise the highest, middle and lowest achievers in the reading comprehension tests conducted. The selection of these 6 students was also made after consultations with the English language teacher of the class. These students participated in a structured interview at the final stage of the study.

3.2.4 The English Language Lessons

The class has five 40-minute periods of English totaling 200 minutes per week. The students are taught all four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, by the same teacher. The teaching of the Literature Component is also conducted within this time allocation. Extensive reading in the library is carried out periodically.

3.2.5 The English Language Paper of the PMR

The English language paper is a compulsory paper for PMR students. It comprises 2 parts. Paper I covers reading comprehension, language forms and functions and cloze passages in the multiple-choice format. Paper II, on the other hand, contains a text completion component and 2 questions for guided composition. This study concerns the reading comprehension component that covers the first 30 questions of Paper I.

3.3 The Research Materials

4 instruments were used in this study. They comprise two sets of reading comprehension tests, a recall task, questionnaires and a structured interview. The following section describes these instruments.

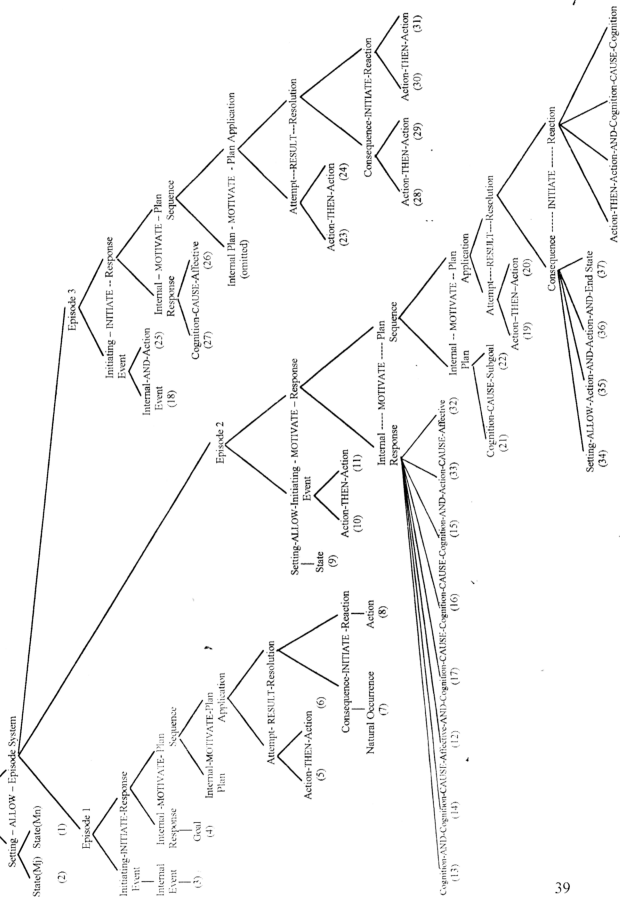
3.3.1 The Reading Comprehension Tests

The 2 sets of reading comprehension tests (Appendices 1 & 2) used in this study were taken from the PMR English examination papers from 1997 to 2002. These tests are *authentic* in the sense that they are samples of what the students will face in the PMR. Each set of reading comprehension test consists of 9 texts with 4 to 7 multiple-choice comprehension questions. The texts are of various types – narrative, expository, etc.

3.3.2 The Recall Task Text

The text for the recall task (Appendix 3) is also an *authentic* text from the PMR. It is a 275-word narrative text, a text type that is deemed familiar to the students. Having acquired the schema for narratives, it was anticipated that the students would not face difficulties with the structure of the text. With reference to the story schema proposed by Stein and Glenn (1979), the text was analyzed to determine its internal structure. The internal structure of the text generally follows the story schema except for the Internal Plan category for Episode 2, which was ordered after the Attempt category rather than before. Fig. 3.1 and Fig. 3.2 present the internal structure of the text.

Category Type	Type of Information	Statement
Minor Setting	State	1. One night in August last year
Major Setting	State	2. while I was revising for my trial examination
Initiating Event	Internal Event	3. I felt hungry
Internal Response	Goal	4. I decided to have a snack
Attempt	Action	5. I went into the kitchen
Attempt	Action	6. and opened the refrigerator
Consequence	Natural Occurrence	7. There was some leftover fried chicken
Reaction	Action	8. and I decided to take it out
Minor Setting	State	9. As I was closing the refrigerator door
Initiating Event	Action	10. something outside the window caught my attention
Internal Response	Action	11. I peered into the darkness
Internal Response	Affect	12. and was shocked at what I saw
Internal Response	Cognition	13. Smoke billowed from Mr Lim's house
Internal Response	Cognition	14. His house was on fire
Internal Response	Cognition	15. I knew that our neighbour the Lim family were not at home that night
Internal Response	Cognition	16. They had left in a hurry for Kuantan earlier in the day
Internal Response	Cognition	17. to visit a relative who was seriously ill
Initiating Event	Internal Event	18. But what about Jimmy?
Attempt	Action	19. I rushed to the phone
Attempt	Action	20. and called the fire brigade
Internal Plan	Cognition	21. Mother and Father were not at home either
Internal Plan	Goal	22. so it was up to me to do the right thing
Attempt	Action	23. After I had given the necessary details to the operator
Attempt	Action	24. I ran quickly across the garden to Mr Lim's house
Internal Response	Action	25. I could hear Jimmy barking
Internal Response	Affect	26. Poor fellow, I thought
Internal Response	Cognition	27. It must be frightened
Consequence	Action	28. When Jimmy saw me
Consequence	Action	29. it stopped barking
Reaction	Action	30. I quickly led it out of its cage
Reaction	Action	31. and took it to my house
Internal Response	Affective	32. The fire was getting out of control
Internal Response	Action	33. I could see flames shooting out of the kitchen window
Minor Setting	State	34. A couple of minutes later
Consequence	Action	35. I heard sirens and a loud screech
Consequence	Action	36. The fire brigade had arrived
Consequence	End State	37. Soon the firemen were busy putting out the fire
Reaction	Action	38. When the Lim family came home the next day
Reaction	Action	39. they praised me for what I had done
Reaction	Cognition	40. Due to my quick action
Reaction	Cognition	41. only the kitchen in the house was damaged



3.3.3 The Questionnaires

Two bilingual questionnaires (Appendices 4 & 5) were used in this study to elicit information from the students. Questionnaire I comprises 15 questions to elicit information pertaining to the students' language background and attitude towards English, their learning strategies, their reading habits, their knowledge of the format of the PMR English paper and the techniques employed in answering reading comprehension questions.

Questionnaire II concerns the recall task – their comprehension of the text, the difficulties faced in producing the written recall protocol and the strategies used to overcome these difficulties.

3.3.4 The Structured Interview

A structured interview (Appendix 6) based on Barnett's (1989:195) questionnaire was employed in this study to gain insights into the students' perceived use of strategies in reading as well as in overcoming difficulties in order to comprehend what they read in English. The students were also interviewed on how they accomplished the recall task, the difficulties they faced and how they overcame these difficulties. As the main aim of this interview was to elicit particular information, it was conducted in the students' native language, Bahasa Melayu. It also helped to minimize the students' misunderstanding of the questions and possible difficulties in expressing responses and opinions.

3.4 The Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out prior to the implementation of the actual study. This was to test the procedures planned and to iron out unforeseen problems. The 18

Form Four students involved in the pilot study were of varied levels of English proficiency. It was found that the instructions given were not precise enough. The weaker students were not able to complete the recall task adequately. In retrospect, they said there were many words that were unfamiliar to them and they could not understand many parts of the text. There were also too many interruptions and distractions from students from other classes going for their recess, announcements made through the PA system and teachers wanting to see certain students in the group. After studying these problems, the appropriate amendments were made.

3.5 The Research Procedure

This study was conducted in the school in the month of July 2003. All the students in the class were assigned a number based on their seating position in the classroom. Before carrying out the study, I had visited the school to obtain permission from the administrators. I explained the nature of the study and requested for students of the top Form Three class to be my subjects. This was to avoid deficits in production when the students carry out the recall task.

For the purpose of characterizing the students' reading comprehension abilities, the two sets of reading comprehension tests were administered in two sessions with a 3-day interval. This was to avoid tiring the students and thus affecting their performance in the tests. Before commencement of the study, I had a brief session with the students to explain the purpose of the reading comprehension tests and recall task. This was done to reduce the students' anxiety on being tested. The

students were given 90 minutes to complete each test. Their answer scripts were then collected, marked and the scores tabulated.

The recall task was administered in the third session. The students were briefed on what they were required to do – that they would be given a text to read silently and after reading, the text would be taken away. The students were also told to read for meaning because they would be asked to recall the text. They were given as much time as they required to read and were told to circle the words they did not understand. However, they were not allowed to discuss the text with their partners (they were seated in pairs). After about 20 minutes, all the students indicated their readiness to begin the recall task. Each student then wrote his or her recall protocol on a piece of given paper. They were given 30 minutes in which to complete this task, after which the written recall protocols were collected.

Once the recall task was completed, the students were given time to rest. After about 30 minutes, the students answered the two bilingual questionnaires beginning with Questionnaire II. This was followed with Questionnaire I. During this session, students' queries concerning the questions were clarified but no attempts were made to influence their responses. However, the students were not prohibited from discussing the questionnaire with their partners. The students were allowed to answer in their first language, as the main aim of these questionnaires was to elicit information.

In the last phase of the study, the 6 key informants were interviewed individually to obtain information on the strategies they used to make sense of what

they read. Though the interview was structured, the responses given by the students led to a variety of additional questions.

Once the data collection procedure was completed, the students' responses in the reading comprehension tests, questionnaires, interviews and the recall task were analysed. Though the students have learnt English as a subject for at least 8 years, their productive skills were weaker than their receptive skills. Their control of the vocabulary and grammar of English was *inexpert* (Carrell, 1984). As such, their written recalls were scored using a loose criterion. As the recall text is a narrative, a genre the students are familiar with, the framework employed in the analysis of the recalls was Stein and Glenn's (1979) story schema. In addition to looking at the representations of important categories of the story, the analysis looked for details important to each category.

3.6 The Scoring Procedure for the Written Recalls

As the essential meaning of what was written was the main criterion for assessment of comprehension, errors in surface details such as spelling and punctuation were not evaluated. With reference to Carrell (1984), the following slight distortions and additions, with examples from the recalls, were allowed:

- Spelling errors

One of the most frequent spelling errors found in the recalls was for the word *brigade* which was written as *briggged*, *briget*, *bridge* and *brigde*. Other misspellings abound. For example, the word *thought* was reproduced as *taught* and *snack* as *snek*. These errors seem to indicate the students' use of

their knowledge of phonetic systems and the similarities that exist between their native language and English as a result of borrowings.

- Grammatical errors

Various types of grammatical errors were found in the written protocols, the most notable being those of tenses. Errors in the use of pronouns were also found as were errors in the use of prepositions, especially in the phrase *on fire*. Some students wrote this phrase as *in fire*.

- Transpositions

This type of error was evident mainly for propositions 19, 20, 21 and 22 in the sequence of recall. This error indicates the students' understanding and use of a story schema in their recall. This will be discussed in the next section.

- Reasonable presuppositions

Some students added inferable material in their recall. For example, '*screeching sound of tyres*' instead of just '*screeching sound*' and '*rescued his home from the fire*', '*thankful*' and '*grateful*' to explain the reason for praising.

- Repetitions of previously recalled propositions

This error occurs when a proposition is repeated in another episode such as when a student recalled the proposition '*only the kitchen was burning*' after the fire was put out as well as in the final section to explain that this proposition was due to the protagonist's quick action.

- Character and event confusions

Students made this distortion in recalling that only the kitchen in Mr. Lim's house was damaged in the fire as a result of the firemen's actions instead of the protagonist's efforts as portrayed in the text. The state of being *shocked*, which was attributed to Mr. Lim upon his arrival home, was instead recalled as the protagonist's reaction upon seeing Mr. Lim's house on fire.

- Exaggerations

These were added as intensifiers such as '*dangerously ill*' in place of '*seriously ill*' and *so hungry* to intensify the protagonist's need for sustenance.

- Irrelevant or wrong information to otherwise correctly recalled proposition

This type of addition did not distort the overall meaning of the proposition. For example, one student added '*his parents*' to the proposition that Mr. Lim was not at home.

Distortions and additions that were not allowed are as follows:

- The use of the students' native language, Bahasa Melayu

As the students were told specifically to write their recalls in English, any inclusions in Bahasa Melayu were not scored. Most instances of the use of the native language were restricted to isolated words or phrases and not entire sentences.

- Incomplete details

Instances of this problem occurred mainly in the setting category. Students recalled '*one night*' but not '*August*' or '*last year*'. For proposition 35, some students recalled only one of the two elements, *sirens* and *loud screech*.

- Additions or substitutions that distorted meaning

Some additions produced by the students distorted the essential meaning of the propositions. For example, one student recalled proposition 9 '*As I was closing the refrigerator door*' as '*When I want to continue my revision*'. Another student recalled the protagonist's internal plan of '*it was up to me to do the right thing*' in the absence of his or her parents as '*they told me to do the right thing*'. There were also 9 recalls that distorted the act of praising with the act of thanking.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has described the research site and the profile of the participants of the study. The methods of data collection in this study have also been explained. The data obtained will be analyzed and the conclusions to be drawn from the findings in this inquiry can be modified in different circumstances and under different conditions as and when necessary as ideas are shared, discussed and investigated further. The following chapter looks at the analysis of the data obtained from the reading comprehension tests, the questionnaires, the structured interview and the written recall protocols.