

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Information Age caused the proliferation of information in various mediums. Students who want to acquire information and equip themselves with knowledge need to read extensively and intensively. Indeed, reading skill is the key to information or knowledge acquisition. In tandem with this, one of the goals of the English Courses offered to students in TAR College is to improve the reading skills of students so that they can be proficient in reading. For the purpose of knowing the effects of a particular English course for the students, the English lecturers who teach the course usually meet to evaluate the course at the end of each academic year or when the need arises. Recently, some changes were made in the reading component of the English Courses offered to CIMA students. Hence, there is a need to evaluate this particular component. This chapter begins with a brief outline of the CIMA Course and the Business English Courses for CIMA students. Subsequently, the chapter moves on to explain the rationale for the dissertation. Finally, the chapter summarizes the aims of the study.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Chartered Institute of Management Accounting (CIMA) is a professional course conducted by the CIMA Examination Board in the United Kingdom. This is a three-year course with English as the medium of instruction. There are two semesters in each year. An examination is held at the end of every semester and

students who have passed the first semester examination will be eligible for the second semester examination.

The unique feature of the CIMA Course offered by TAR College is that its Year One and Year Two students sit for the Internally Assessed CIMA Examinations. It is only in Year Three that the students sit for examinations conducted by the CIMA Examination Board in the United Kingdom. As CIMA students need to use English extensively in the course of their studies, the CIMA Examination Board only accepts students who have obtained at least a credit pass in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English subject. In order to enhance the students' command of English, TAR College has included the Business English Courses in the Internally Assessed CIMA Examinations.

There are three Business English Courses offered to CIMA students in TAR College. All CIMA students attend 3 hours of lessons per week, a total of 42 hours per semester. The AELE 2153 English For Business Communication is taught in the first semester and the AELE 3053 English For Business is taught in the second semester of Year One. In the first semester of Year Two, the AELE 3153 English For Management is taught. The English Courses are made up of three major components. They are reading, writing and speaking components. Each component consists of the skills (reading, writing or speaking skills) that are taught and the materials that are used to teach the skills. It is assumed that the teaching of the reading, writing and speaking skills in the respective components

can help students improve their language proficiency. One of the ways to find out the effectiveness of any component or any course is to conduct an evaluation. In order to find out the effects of the recent amendments for the reading component in the English Courses for CIMA students, an evaluation of the reading component is the focus of this study. The study begins with a brief discussion on the objectives, contents and materials used in the reading component.

1.2 THE READING COMPONENT OF THE ENGLISH COURSES

Generally, the reading component attempts to create awareness of nine reading skills that can be applied in reading. The skills are “skimming”, “scanning”, “locating topic sentences”, “locating main points”, “getting general view of text”, “recognizing connectors”, “referring to words that link ideas”, “predicting what will follow”, and “finding meanings of unknown words”. The instruction given on reading hopes to enhance and promote the learning and application of these skills. The ultimate aim of the reading component is to increase the comprehension ability of the students so that they can comprehend the textbooks, reference materials and journals independently. Eventually, improvement in comprehension ability should result in better performance in assignments and examinations.

The following pages discuss the contents of the reading component which greatly influence the achievement of the teaching objectives mentioned above.

1.2.1 THE CONTENTS OF THE READING COMPONENT

(A). READING COMPONENT IN AELE 2153-BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Unit 1 A Taxonomy of Reading Skills and Vocabulary.

Unit 2 Issues At Work.

(Focus on pronunciation, volume, tone, pace and pause).

Unit 3 Information Technology.

(Identify key information).

(Study the organization of text).

(Learn the linking words to know the relationship of information).

(B). READING COMPONENT IN AELE 3053-BUSINESS ENGLISH

Unit 1 Economics.

(Find the main message by looking at title and the highlighted sentences).

Unit 2 Company Account.

(Identify topic sentences, main points and details).

(Read and give opinion).

Unit 3 Financial Planning & Financial Climate.

(Use key word to guide understanding).

(Skimming and scanning).

Unit 4 Legal Contract.

(Connecting and linking ideas).

(C). READING COMPONENT IN AELE 3153-ENGLISH FOR
MANAGEMENT

- Unit 1 Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision Making.
(Critical thinking processes - analysis, evaluation, induction
and deduction).
- Unit 2 Management and Cultural Diversity.
(Read with critical attitude, differentiate between facts and
opinions).
- Unit 3 Standards and Compliance.
(Sense relationship in a text: cause and effect, compare and
contrast, and similarities and differences).
(Distinguish between literal and implied meaning, know
author's goals, intents and biases).

1.2.2 MATERIALS IN THE READING COMPONENT

The reading component contains ten units. The first unit of the reading component deals with reading and vocabulary skills. It is in this unit that important business concepts are introduced and key business vocabulary is taught. The tasks include matching words to meanings, guessing meanings of words using contextual clues, completing sentences with the words learned and looking up the meanings of unknown words in the dictionary. Other tasks such as attaching prefixes, suffixes to roots, forming words from nouns, verbs, and adjectives, giving meanings to

affixes and filling in the blanks with the suitable form of the words are also included. These tasks familiarize students with business vocabulary and provide them with opportunities to use the words learnt.

McCarthy (1990) points out that poor knowledge of lexical items leads to poor comprehension. The main aim of this unit is to equip students with vocabulary learning strategies that help them decode meanings of lexical items in reading texts and improve their comprehension.

The reading lessons commence with an introduction of reading skills. A total of nine reading skills are taught to the students during the reading lessons of the Business English Courses. The skills taught were “skimming”, “scanning”, “locating topic sentence”, “locating main points”, “getting general view of text”, “recognizing connectors”, “referencing”, “predicting” and “vocabulary learning strategies”.

Subsequently the lessons deal with the reading process. The reading units utilize texts that discuss business concepts and themes. Some key business vocabulary that is taught earlier appear in these texts. Each text in the units is chosen to show that the reading approach varies according to the aims of reading. Each text is accompanied by tasks that provide opportunities to apply the reading skills. The text also has comprehension questions that gauge the students’ ability to extract, infer, deduce and interpret information.

to reading in the class, the students are also required to read ten business related newspaper articles in a semester. Incorporating the reading of newspaper articles is one of the attempts to cultivate reading interest among the students. Truly, improvement in reading can only be achieved by spending time on reading. Smith (1994) believes that the students who read more tend to have better understanding.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Badrawi (1992) states that the purpose for teaching reading is to develop in the reader the attitudes, abilities, and skills needed for obtaining information, fostering and reacting to ideas, developing interests and finally deriving pleasure by reading through understanding or “comprehension”. In addition to stating the reason for teaching reading, Badrawi (1992) also notes that reading skills which aid comprehension should be taught to the readers.

For the CIMA students in TAR College, reading has been identified as the most important skill among the four skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing. The emphasis on reading is justifiable because the medium of instruction for CIMA Course is English. In their pursuit of knowledge and information, the CIMA students are required to read efficiently, effectively and extensively in English the textbooks, reference books and other relevant reading materials.

Reading in English is a problem among the majority of TAR students and the CIMA students are no exception. These students have problems in reading in

English because the majority of them received education in the Chinese medium primary schools. Besides that, English being a single subject in all secondary schools in Malaysia also limited the exposure to English these students had.

The Report of the Cabinet Committee (1985: 56) states that at present Bahasa Malaysia is widely used not only in schools but also outside the school where it is no less important in its function as the medium of communication amongst the various races in this country. The level of achievement and the standard of the teaching and learning of this subject can be said to be satisfactory in general. The lack of usage in English for official purposes and in the community may have caused Malaysian students to be more proficient in Malay and weaker in English.

Therefore it is undeniable that the students' proficiency in English has declined due to the changing role of English in Malaysia generally, and in the Malaysian educational system specifically. English was the official language in Malaya and the medium of instruction in many schools during British colonization. After achieving independence and acceptance of the Talib Report, Bahasa Malaysia has become the most important language in schools and society in Malaysia.

Munby (1978: 3) points out that in countries where there is a change in the status of English from medium to subject, the standard of English tends to decline. This phenomenon is seen in Malaysia.

Reading for the CIMA students is aimed at comprehending and accessing information from the written texts. In order to enable students to have a satisfactory level of comprehension, the Business English Courses naturally have to focus on improving the reading ability of students. Indeed, the acquisition of knowledge depends on the ability to read (Langer: 1981).

In view of the high percentage of time students need to spend on reading in academic setting, failure to comprehend important texts will certainly affect CIMA students' performance in other content areas like Law, Management and Accounting (Porter: 1989; Tyson and Woodward: 1989; Woodward and Elliot: 1990 cited in Jitendra and Gardill: 1996). Therefore it is important to help students improve their ability to comprehend texts.

For the CIMA students in TAR College, reading the materials and doing the tasks in the reading component are the means for improving their reading skills. Since students spend a great deal of time reading the materials in the reading component, positive attitudes towards the materials will surely encourage them to read and negative attitudes will discourage them from reading.

Sharp (1990) points out that generally, students prefer course materials that are directly related to their needs. However, a review on textbooks and materials used in ESP shows that many reading materials do not meet the specific needs of readers (Lyn: 1974: 88), (Brown and Hirst: 1983). In view of this, it is vital to

ensure that materials in the reading component are relevant to the students' needs. One of the ways to find out whether the materials match the students' needs is to evaluate the materials used in the reading component.

Certainly, materials evaluation ought to be given due attention. Commenting on problems related to textbooks, Kam and Lee (1984) highlight the fact that ESP course designers have concentrated on materials production and neglected materials evaluation. Alderson and William (1984) points out that materials writers, teacher trainers and language teachers should give more consideration to the problem of evaluation. Ad-hoc decisions, based on personal prejudice and the vagaries of language teaching and linguistic fashion need to be replaced by decisions based upon research, upon empirical evidence, upon the results of an adequately validated evaluation procedure (Alderson and William cited in Kam and Lee: 1984).

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Based on the discussion above, it is evident that reading is vital to students' academic achievement and the quality of the reading materials affects students' attitudes towards reading. As the reading component has just been revised recently to focus on instruction on reading skills, it is necessary to find out how effective the reading component is in helping CIMA students improve their reading ability. In this study, the effectiveness of the reading component is discovered through an evaluation of the component.

Firstly, the study seeks to discover what CIMA students in TAR College think about the reading component. As the reading component contains materials that are used to teach the reading skills, the students' views about the reading component are categorized into views on the suitability of materials used and views on the reading skills taught. The necessity of knowing the students' views finds support in the work of Upton, James; Laughlin, Rosemary; et al. (1992). According to them, students are valuable consultants of one's teaching. Students' responses provide valuable insights into students' perceptions of teaching and course content besides giving them a sense of ownership in the course.

Secondly, the study attempts to discover the views of the lecturers regarding the suitability and organization of the reading component. The lecturers' views on the reading component are also classified into views on reading materials and views on reading skills. Upton et al. (1992), also note that course evaluation, teacher evaluation and student self-evaluation are separate, equal, and interrelated processes. They propose that such collaborative evaluation becomes an on-going process rather than a once a year experience.

Thirdly, this study attempts to discover whether the objectives of the reading component have been fulfilled.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the views of the students regarding the suitability of the reading component?

2.What are the views of the lecturers regarding the suitability and organization of the reading component?

3.Has the reading component fulfilled its objectives of helping students improve their comprehension of business texts in order to have good grades in examination?

Feedback from both students and lecturers will provide valuable information about the appropriateness of the reading skills approach, the suitability of the materials used and whether the reading component has fulfilled its objectives. The information gathered will give an indication as to whether the reading component needs revision.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

According to Lynch (1996), English teaching professionals are trained to regard course and materials evaluation as an essential part of their work, and much of the literature on evaluation assumes that regular revision is integral to course improvement.

However, evaluation is often perceived as threatening the interest of the teaching staff who are being evaluated. For this reason, evaluation tends to be neglected in project planning and development. It is believed that most of the evaluations were conducted when there were external pressures, or when there was need for

assistance (Alderson and Scott: 1992). In the context of the ESP projects, accountability to the sponsors was the main reason an evaluation was conducted (Alderson and Beretta: 1992).

At the time the research was conducted, formal evaluations on the English courses offered have not been conducted in TAR College. The informal evaluations held in the past were meetings conducted at the end of the academic year among lecturers who taught the course. This is the first time a formal evaluation is conducted whereby both lecturers and students are invited to give their views on the reading component by responding in interviews and questionnaires.

The main reason for focusing on the reading component instead of the whole course is that the reading ability greatly affects the performance of the students' academic success. Besides that, it is easier to have a rather detailed and in-depth evaluation when the focus is on a component of the English courses.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of help to all the lecturers who are teaching the English Courses to Business students in TAR College, especially those concerned with the revision of the existing courses and the design of future courses. It is also hope that the findings will be of value to lecturers who are teaching Business English Courses in other colleges.

From the findings, recommendations can be made regarding the reading component currently used. Data derived from the findings could be used to improve the design of the reading component and upgrade instructional materials used in the reading component.

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