CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the rationale for this study, the statement of the problem, the research questions and the significance of the study.

The Rationale for the Study

Recent research done in Malaysia (Mahaletchumy, 1994; Bhajan, 1995; Chuang, 1995) on the teaching of ESL writing has consistently indicated that most ESL writing teachers use the traditional, product-based approaches, when advances made in composition research have moved beyond the traditional approaches. Mahaletchumy (1994) reports,

> Teachers seem to fall back on the security of the traditional approach to writing....Apparently teachers' instructional decisions are not based on innovative movements in the field of ESL or ESL writing. No matter what new ideas are introduced, teachers' practices seem to rely on logistical issues, and their perceptions of their students, their students' parents and their superordinates. (p. 139)

Similarly, Bhajan (1995) found that teaching of writing is traditional, mechanical and product-focussed. She states,

> Malaysian teachers were either not aware of the process approach to writing, were aware but did not utilise it or claim to use process writing but in reality were not. What appears to be the problem here is that these teachers did not seem to have understood the philosophy of the process approach. More studies need to be carried out to determine if this is a problem generally faced by teachers and if so, to train teachers to understand the philosophy behind the methodology before implementing all or part of it. (p. 70)

Chuang (1995) concurs, stating, "By all accounts, process writing seems to be interpreted as a means of processing grammar, of eliminating mechanical errors" (p. 79). Farrel (1999) reports similar findings in Singapore. He states,

> ...most pre-service English teachers in Singapore have been educated in English by traditional methods of drill and memorization of grammar rules. Thus, they bring prior experiences of having been in the system to the teacher education program....The problem is that there can be a mismatch between what the students have learned in the past and what they are presented with in the teacher educational program. (p. 2)

In the light of the findings of these studies, questions arise as to why there appears to be resistance to innovations in the teaching of ESL writing advocated by teacher educators. Are innovations advocated suitable for the Malaysian context and are procedures to introduce, manage and sustain innovations in line with theory concerning teacher change? To investigate these questions, I look at one programme conducted at the University of Malaya, a teacher training programme in TESL at undergraduate level.

The B.Ed. (TESL) Programme Conducted at the University of Malaya

This study investigates five teachers as they progressed through the B.Ed. (TESL) programme conducted at the University of Malaya. I focussed on one particular course in the teaching of ESL writing, which is part of the B.Ed. (TESL) programme, a four-semester programme, conducted at the University of Malaya. I took a longitudinal view and first investigated the five selected teachers' practices in teaching ESL writing prior to enrolling in the programme. I then followed through as the teachers progressed through the course in teaching writing, presented mini lessons during a course on simulated teaching and finally as they carried out lessons in the classroom during teaching practice

(please refer to p. 41 for a diagrammatic representation of programme, in relation to this study). The teaching of writing course was conducted for seven weeks (three hours per week) during the second half of the second semester beginning on 5 January 1998 and ending on 21 February 1998. Simulated teaching was conducted for 14 weeks, beginning on 5 November 1998 and ending on 18 February 1999 (one-week semester break in between). Practical teaching lasted for six weeks, beginning on 22 March 1999 and ending on 30 April 1999. Many of the teacher trainees who enrolled in this programme had had some teacher training and teaching experience and enrolled in this programme to further their academic qualifications to degree level. Since many of the teacher trainees in this programme had some teaching experience, five ex-teachers were selected as subjects of this study (see p. 44 for criteria for selection).

The Statement of the Problem

Fullen (1991) states that most teachers will not or cannot change simply by being lectured to or ordered to, and that sometimes innovations are strongly advocated in terms of supposed benefits for students, without clear evidence that the particular teachers' students would benefit. He explains that innovations may contain sound theory and principles, but they are not translatable into practice with the resources at the disposal of teachers. This study focussed on five ex-teachers as they progressed through the B.Ed. (TESL) programme. The teachers' perceptions and responses to ESL writing approaches and techniques being advocated by their lecturer, reveal how they interpreted and understood these approaches and techniques. Problems arose because of the realities of the Malaysian classroom and the need to understand and appreciate theoretical principles

behind techniques and then adapt procedures to suit the Malaysian setting. This study attempts to describe and interpret changes taking place in classrooms after the teachers completed the teaching of writing course. In order to describe and understand changes taking place, if any, in the practices of the teacher trainees selected for this study, the following are the research questions.

Research Questions

1. What were the approaches and techniques in teaching ESL writing skills used by five teacher trainees before they began the B.Ed. (TESL) programme and what were the problems they faced?

2. a) What were the approaches and techniques in teaching ESL writing advocated by the lecturer of the writing course and how were they presented and explained to the teacher trainees?

   b) What were the five teacher trainees' responses to these writing approaches and techniques?

3. Did the five teacher trainees appropriate ideas from the teaching of writing course into their own teaching strategies during simulated teaching and teaching practice? If so, how? And if not, why not?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

As can be seen from the chronological progression of the research questions, the focus of this study falls within the theoretical context of teacher change. Teacher change is basically concerned with why some new ideas or practices are successfully implemented and adopted while others are not. Although some researchers have differentiated between change and innovation (e.g., Bailey 1992), other prominent researchers in the field of teacher change (Markee, 1997; Kennedy, 1988; Fullan, 1991; Pennington, 1995a) view the words "change" and "innovation" as synonymous. Markee 1997 explains, "...it is individual end users' subjective perceptions of newness, rather than any objective criterion of newness, that determines whether an approach to organizing language instruction counts as an innovation" (p. 55). Similarly, Pennington (1995a) states, "...it may be new in the sense that the person has not yet developed an attitude towards it, or has not attempted to use it" (p. 39). This definition of innovation, used interchangeably with change, is used in this study.

As shown in the studies cited (Mahaletchumy, 1994; Bhajan, 1995: Chuang, 1995) in the rationale for the study (p. 1), a teacher-centred, examination-oriented culture remains in ELT in Malaysia although teacher educators have been striving to implement innovative ideas. Prominent researchers have indicated that bringing about change in teaching practice in actual day to day lessons is an extremely long, complex and difficult process. (Kennedy, 1987; 1988; Markee, 1993; 1997; Freeman, 1989; 1992; Fullen, 1991; Widdowson, 1993; Nunan, 1989; Nunan and Lamb, 1996; Stoller, 1994; White, 1993; Murphy, 1991; Brock, 1994; Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Pennington, 1995a; 1995b; 1996; Barkhuizan and Gough, 1996; Bailey 1992). To form a theoretical framework for

this study, I drew on the theories of teacher change developed by Markee (1997), Fullan (1991) and Kennedy (1988).

Markee (1993) states that a number of language teaching innovations have developed in the last two decades including the notional/functional syllabus, the process syllabus, the natural approach, the procedural syllabus, and task-based language teaching, but it is only recently that applied linguists have begun to discover the complications and difficulties associated with implementing these innovations.

Markee (1997) introduces a "diffusion-of-innovations" perspective of teacher change in which he highlights a number of guiding principles based on the question, "Who adopts what, where, when, why and how?" (p. 43). He brings out the complexities involved with every single word that forms this question. He explains that which innovations are accepted or rejected are influenced by the personalities and the previous experience of participants and a number of attributes (explicitness, complexity, flexibility, ect.) that innovations possess. Markee (1997) points out that change agents need to "...energetically explain the relevance of these innovations to teachers, who may otherwise see these innovations as intrusive busy work that takes away time and energy that they could otherwise be devoting to their teaching" (p. 174). Markee (1997) also stresses, "The bottom line is that change agents should never assume that they have successfully communicated their message by discussing it once or twice" (p. 174). Teachers need constant clarifications, support and guidance and feel they own the innovation by actually using, adapting and modifying an innovation. This prevents mechanistic and superficial change behaviour. Furthermore, teachers are more likely to adopt an innovation if they do not feel coerced into behaving in a certain way. Long-term

institutional support and the change agents' awareness of the complexities involved in teacher change are other principles of Markee's diffusion of innovations perspective.

Fullan (1991) deals exhaustively with educational change. He states,

> Change is needed because teachers are frustrated, bored and burnt out....What can be done to increase the number of successes and decrease the number of failures? Indeed, what can be done to increase the teacher's and the school's capacity for managing change and bringing about improvements on a continuous basis? (p. 131)

Fullan emphasises that that too often we think of change only in terms of the teachers. He says that equally important are those around them at the school, district, state, and federal levels. "If there is any changing to be done everyone is implicated and must face it in relation to his or her own role" (Fullan 1991, p. 143). Fullan feels that in-service training of teachers has been ineffective and wasteful more times than not. He explains that a teacher could use new curriculum materials or technologies without altering the teaching approach. Or a teacher could use the materials and alter some teaching behaviour without coming to grips with the conceptions or beliefs underlying the change. He feels that most developers or advocates of change confuse the change with the change process. He emphasises that change is a process not an event. He proposes, "Commitment is needed, but it must be balanced with the knowledge that people may be at different starting points, with different legitimate priorities, and that the change process may very well result in transformations or variations in the change" (Fullan, 1991, p. 139).

Along these lines, Kennedy (1988) explains a hierarchy of interrelating socio-cultural subsystems: institutional, educational, administrative, political and cultural, which constrain classroom innovation. He says, "Innovation is more likely to take place

in a more loosely-organized system, with a high degree of openness to outside influences, where structures may be temporary and easy to change, communications are informal, and flexibility is welcomed" (p. 334). Kennedy (1988) feels that it is not enough for people to act differently which he says is a surface phenomenon. Like Fullan, he says that what is required is a change in the way they think about certain issues, which is a deeper and more complex change. He stresses, "It is also important, though it unfortunately rarely happens, to return to projects some time after they have finished to see whether the change has been incorporated into the system, whether it has itself led to further innovation, and to what extent it has undergone diffusion" (p. 330). Kennedy (1987) discusses three main types of strategies to bring about change. These strategies are termed as "power-coercive strategies", "rational-empirical strategies" and "normative-re-educative strategies". He explains that power-coercive strategies are based on sanctions of some sort which force people to change. The rational-empirical strategies are based on the belief that people are rational beings and will change when it is proved that the change will bring about benefits. The third, the normative-re-educative strategies, which he feels offers the greatest potential, see change as a much more complex phenomenon. Kennedy (1987) explains,

> Underlying the strategy is the idea that people will act according to the values and attitudes prevalent in a given society or culture....Implementation of the third strategy...necessitates a collaborative, problem-solving approach, with all those affected by the change involved in some way and making their own decisions about the degree and manner of change they wish to accept. (p. 164)

This collaborative approach with the different stakeholders in the education system: teachers; researchers; curriculum specialists; programme managers and administrators, is also promoted by Nunan (1989) and Freeman (1989).

The theories of these researchers (Markee's diffusion of innovation theory, Fullan's emphasis on the change process and Kennedy's concern with socio-cultural factors influencing teacher change) will be used in this study to throw light on the changes attempted in teaching writing by the participants of this study, the five teachers undergoing the B.Ed. (TESL) programme conducted at UM, as they progressed through the simulated teaching and practical teaching components of the programme.

Significance of the study

Although teacher trainers in Malaysia have been promoting the process-based approach since the late 1980s, teacher trainers have noted that what actually happens in the classrooms seldom reflects the innovations that they have been advocating. (Samuel, 1997). Zamel (1987) stresses that it is important that ESL teachers of writing take into account the recent findings in research on composition and make the necessary changes in approaches and techniques they are using so that students benefit from recent research. Recent research has seriously challenged the way in which ESL writing was taught in the past, when the focus was on surface features of text and grammar correction. The composing process is now seen as an extremely complex undertaking and the process involves not only the act of writing but also acts of idea generating, prewriting, rewriting, communicating, and achieving goals.

This study of the struggle, difficulties and problems of the five selected teacher trainees with the ideas advocated by their lecturer could lead to a better understanding of the needs of ESL writing teachers in Malaysia. Changes taking place in teaching strategies will reveal aspects of innovations that are accepted or rejected. The reasons for the decisions made by the teacher trainees concerning what is appropriate for them could lead to a reappraisal of the approaches and techniques, many of which were developed from results of research done in North America and may not be suitable for the Malaysian setting. The findings of this study may benefit Malaysian teacher trainers and teacher trainees in pre-service preparation and also practising teachers in making classroom decisions concerning the teaching of ESL writing.