

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background

Reading is a vital skill in order to obtain academic as well as social competence. Central to reading ability is reading comprehension as it is insufficient to just be able to read without understanding what is being read. As such, the ability to perform a reading comprehension task efficiently requires the acquisition of pertinent literacy skills such as being able to decode words presented in both familiar as well as unfamiliar written text. Illiteracy does not necessarily mean the complete absence of ability to read, and literacy covers a wide spectrum of capabilities – all the way from being able to enjoy a story written for children to reading a scientific text with understanding. While a number of literate people may not see the need to read children’s stories or scientific texts, reading would still have an important place in their lives as they need to read regularly either for sheer enjoyment of it or in order to function in life, and more importantly, they need to comprehend what they read.

Bormuth (1969) contends that reading comprehension should result in increased acquisition of information as the result of reading. Reading texts are language texts, hence, comprehension is a form of response to the language system. Carroll (1972) on the other hand, distinguishes reading comprehension skills from memorizing as the

former requires a certain amount of intellectual effort. Calfee and Curley (1984) define reading comprehension in terms of recognition of text structures. The readers' foremost task is to identify the organizational structure of the text and then modify this content to fit their purpose for reading. In other words, it is a process of obtaining what they need from the text.

Nelson-Herber (1986) found that most vocabulary acquisition is highly related to reading comprehension. According to Rose Tunku Ismail (1999), Malaysian pupils generally do not understand what they read in English mainly because they do not know the meaning of many of the words they come across in the prescribed texts. Although there may be other factors to explain the poor reading comprehension among Malaysian school children, the possession of sufficient vocabulary is crucial to reading comprehension. It is, therefore, unfortunate that Malaysian children are not taught dictionary skills in their primary school years when they are first exposed to reading for academic purposes.

According to a *New Straits Times* report (dated 25th May 2006), 162,000 Malaysian primary and secondary students cannot read. The Education Ministry's record for the period showed that the bulk of 120,000 students who could not read were in primary schools. In this same report, the Deputy Education Minister, Datuk Noh Omar, says that despite these 'handicaps', the students are expected to sit and pass national examinations such as the *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR), Primary School Assessment in

Standard Six (at age twelve), the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR), Lower Secondary School Assessment in Form Three (at age fifteen), and the *Sijil Persekolahan Menengah* (SPM) Secondary School Certificate in Form Five (at age seventeen). Datuk Noh added that our system (the Malaysian education system) does not allow these students to be exempted from such examinations. However, as an effort to prevent the rate of school failure from escalating, from 2006 onwards, the ministry introduced the *Kelas Intervensi Awal Membaca dan Menulis (KIA2M)* or *Early Intervention of Reading and Writing*, which is an intervention programme to provide basic reading and writing skills for Year One pupils in national and vernacular schools.

Under KIA 2M, Standard One pupils are required to sit for a special *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) test to gauge their reading and writing skills three months after enrolment. Pupils who are identified as having reading and writing difficulties are then required to attend special KIA 2M classes which are conducted outside of the normal school hours. Although it is still too early to tell, the pupils who have benefitted from this programme who are now at the end of their Year Three and about to move to Phase II of the primary school syllabus, are showing better reading comprehension skills, as reflected in the school based assessments (based on personal communication with class teachers).

Better educational provisions are in store under the Ninth Malaysian Plan, says the Education Ministry Parliamentary Secretary, P. Komala Devi, whereby RM40 million

has been allocated for the expansion and upgrading of the special classes known as the Integration Programme in mainstream schools. The Education Ministry also plans to add 46 preschool classes to the programme (*New Straits Times*, 11th May 2006). The decision to provide more and better special and early education provision is a long overdue effort. Nevertheless, it is still in its infancy stage of implementation and will take at least six years to produce any significant results.

However, what needs to be highlighted here is that these programmes focus only on improving reading and writing skills in Bahasa Melayu. A more compounding problem for many Malaysian school children is reading in the English Language which is fast becoming a foreign language as compared to a 'strong second language' (as stated in the Education Act, (1952). This is further compounded by the fact that from 2008 onwards, all UPSR examinations will be tested in English, not in Bahasa Melayu. If the Ministry continues to ignore intervention needs in English, students entering tertiary education in the private sector, where the medium of instruction is English, will face further difficulties coping with learning. As such, reading comprehension skills in English must be taught at the earliest possible age to ensure that every child leaves secondary education with the appropriate level of reading comprehension skills to help them cope with the demands of tertiary education or workforce.

Malaysia, as the rest of the world, has always been aware of the importance of English Language proficiency. In 1957, when Malaya (as Malaysia was known then) gained

independence from the British, English was adopted as an alternate official language with Bahasa Melayu (Asmah, 1996). The decision to convert the medium of instruction in schools from English to Bahasa Melayu, (which began in stages from 1968 and completed by 1984) was generally accepted as a necessary step towards the promotion of social integration of the various races. However, this change has also brought about a decline in the level of English Language proficiency among the younger generation.

Recognizing this downward slide, together with the pressure posed by the higher demand for a workforce that is proficient in English due to rapid internationalization, in 1994, the government permitted the use of English in local institutions of higher learning, especially in the teaching of science and technical subjects (Asmah, 1996). Inevitably, primary schools were pushed to step up in preparing children to be more proficient and efficient in the English Language especially in the fields of science and technology. Therefore, in 2003, the medium of instruction for the teaching of Mathematics and Science in Year One, Form One and Lower Six was switched back to English. A report in *The Star* (5th February 2003) on this issue reflected the country's optimism that with this move, the standard of English among Malaysians may improve eventually as the ability to understand scientific texts and mathematical problems in English may be transferred to the ability to perform other tasks in English, including day to day communication.

English as a second language taught in Malaysian schools, comprises four major components - listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some pupils may be able to speak English for simple day to day communication in the school and answer simple questions about themselves, talk about their likes and dislikes but for some reason or other, may not be able to answer reading comprehension questions as required of the syllabus (personal observation as an English teacher in the government school system).

According to Rose Tunku Ismail (1999), low English proficiency is one of the major reasons for reading comprehension difficulties among Malaysian schoolchildren. Similarly, Haldyna (1994) contends that test takers may have a high degree of knowledge about a domain but fail to show their knowledge because the test taker's primary language is not English. Other problems related to reading comprehension difficulties identified in these two studies are lack of prior knowledge or schemata, limited vocabulary and inability to understand words, phrases and ideas presented in the text, all of which generally lead to poor decoding skills. Children are focused on decoding in reading texts. Therefore, according to Chall (1996), their comprehension growth might best be accommodated by the instructor reading to them. Studies have found that young learners obtain new vocabulary through reading stories, contend Elley (1989). The notion about children constructing knowledge about words may explain the differences in decoding skills in various reading comprehension programs, say Chall (1996). As the child is provided early and systematic information about the decoding, contends Chall (1996), it may not matter if the child does well, as long as the child

shows some progress with time. Children do differ in their need for guidance, but most children must have explicit support.

Bormuth (1969) puts forward an ‘operational definition’ of what comprehension intended to be, which is free of introspection. Reading comprehension, says Bormuth (1969) is an increase in information as the result of reading. Reading is an action based language texts, hence comprehension is a response to the language system. The items of the language acquisition are listed as sub-skills in the Year Four English Syllabus for Malaysian Schools (see Appendix B). Reading comprehension is given importance at the school level as it leads to the UPSR Paper 1 which comprises 40 objective questions to test comprehension, among other skills. Starting from Year One, school based examinations test reading comprehension via blank filling, short answers, answering ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to questions and copying words and sentences correctly. In Year Four where pupils advance from Phase I (Years 1, 2 and 3) to Phase II (Years 4, 5, and 6) under the *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah - KBSR* (New Primary School Curriculum), they are expected to answer comprehension questions through both objective and subjective questions.

Generally, annual reports on UPSR results released by the Ministry of Education each year show the consistent trend of better performance in English in urban schools in comparison to the performance in rural schools. Therefore, to bridge the gap, various means of improving the standard of English have been employed. Cultivating the

reading habit (of English materials) is seen as one way to help pupils enhance their proficiency in the English. Programmes such as the '*Program Nilam*', a reading programme which rewards pupils who read the most number of books within a school year, were directed by the Ministry of Education to be carried out in every primary school in Malaysia. Pupils are encouraged to read a variety of books in both English and Bahasa Melayu. School based test results show that pupils who are avid readers (as evident in the number of books and variety of books they read under the *Program Nilam*) are more likely to generally perform better in the examinations than their peers who do not read (personal observation as an English teacher in the Malaysian government school system). It is undeniable that reading and the ability to comprehend the different levels of meaning from the reading are important life skills; skills that may be mastered in an academic environment, enhanced by experiences gained outside the academic environment and transferred to various settings.

Rosenbalt and Langer (1994) proposed two types of reading: aesthetic and efferent reading. During an aesthetic reading, the focus of the reader is on the reading experience itself. As the reading act proceeds, the reader draws on recollection of things past, senses relationships with other things and savours the artistry of the author. Efferent reading is concerned with the sole purpose of extracting information. The KBSR English Language syllabus (see Appendix B) promotes both types of reading; it covers all types of reading comprehension texts - factual texts, fairy tales, poetry,

dialogues and reports – with the aim of providing a wider range of language learning experiences.

Rosenbalt and Langer (1994) suggest that teachers who support the practice of making available to students a wider range of language experiences believe that reading ability develops at a naturally faster rate when students are given opportunities to engage in holistic, meaningful and functional experiences with print. Comprehension, they contend, always takes place as needed within the context of functional reading experiences. However, for the teachers in Malaysian government schools where the classrooms are often overcrowded, holistic and meaningful experiences may not be a possible practice even if they believe in exposing their pupils to a wider range of reading experiences. Hence, Malaysian teachers are challenged to provide that much needed individual attention and care in order to gradually transform a weak reader into a more efficient and autonomous reader by the end of his or her primary school education.

1.1 Problem Statement

Most Malaysians, from policy makers, researchers, employers, teachers and parents, recognize the importance of being proficient in English. Due to the disparity between urban and rural schools in terms of the availability of many language learning opportunities such as modern technology, better living conditions and exposure to the media, teachers working with pupils within an urban school setting are often expected to

produce good results in the UPSR English Paper. This expectation has been met to some extent as evident in the published annual reports of the UPSR results. However, at the individual school level, analysis of the UPSR English Paper results may not show such a positive outcome for some children. There are still quite a worrying number of primary school pupils in various parts of the Klang Valley who are unable to read and write in English when they leave the primary school system (based on personal communication with English teachers in the Klang Valley).

Six years of formal English Language instruction have not been able to prepare these pupils sufficiently for the higher level secondary school challenges they will be facing. The task of preparing pupils for the English paper is becoming increasingly challenging for the teachers as is the case of the school in which this study was carried out. Therefore, identifying the problems that may have led to the difficulties these pupils face should be the first step in helping them overcome the difficulties. When asked to identify the one problem their pupils face in completing classroom activities during English lessons, experienced English teachers would say with conviction, that some of the pupils are unable to understand the simplest text prescribed at their level. Comprehension difficulties in English may first and foremost, be due to low English proficiency, especially since English has become more of a foreign language rather than a second language to many young Malaysians. However, there are also pupils who are able to communicate orally in passable English, yet, are persistently failing to achieve

the minimum pass grade on school-based English tests. For these pupils, their difficulties may be influenced by factors other than just low English proficiency.

Identifying the specific problems these pupils face may not be an easy task for even the most well-meaning of teachers and especially for teachers who have to cater for the needs of up to forty or more pupils in a class. The literature is abound with possible factors influencing poor learning and low academic performance. Vacca and Vacca (1998) provide evidence that students with physical, learning or emotional disabilities and students who lack the strategies needed to learn effectively with texts are often those at risk of doing poorly at reading comprehension. Vacca and Vacca (1998) also provide evidence of how some students who struggle with reading may have developed fluency and the ability to read print smoothly and automatically, but may not know what to do with the text beyond just vocalizing the words. In other words, few students know how and when to effectively use strategies to explore and construct meaning during activities that require literacy, unless they have been formally taught these strategies.

When Malaysian schoolchildren enter Phase II of the primary school education, their Year Four English teachers expect them to have already mastered the skills of pre-reading which is an essential set induction strategy for promoting comprehension, as well as strategies to perform reading comprehension tasks set by the school and the Malaysian Education Ministry. However, the researcher's personal experience with Year Four pupils show that they have not mastered the necessary skills or are not in the

habit of putting these skills into use at the beginning of every reading task. Pupils who have not been taught the essential strategies to effectively interact with the reading texts may develop difficulties comprehending the texts. When reading comprehension difficulties become so serious that they impede learning, remediation or intervention strategies would have to be put in place. It then becomes important to identify the types of difficulties in order to provide appropriate remediation or intervention.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

As a teacher with many years of experience teaching English to primary school pupils, the researcher has reasons to believe that part of the pupils' failure in obtaining satisfactory grades for English is due to their inability to comprehend the texts they are expected to read. It is, therefore, the aim of this study to identify the level and types of difficulties pupils face in trying to comprehend various reading texts and to explore the reasons for these difficulties. Hence, the objectives of this study are:

1. To analyse pupils' results for the English Language school-based tests in order to determine their comprehension levels;
2. To obtain background information on the pupils' English Language use patterns at home and at school in order to obtain a more informed picture of the extent of their exposure to English;

3. To examine pupils' responses in the English Language school-based tests in order to identify the types of difficulties they face in performing reading comprehension tasks;
4. To use the information obtained from (1), (2) and (3) above as well as the findings from existing literature as the basis for explaining the possible reasons for their poor reading comprehension.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to meet the aims and objectives set, this study will employ the appropriate methodology to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the reading comprehension levels of the subjects as measured by their English Language school-based assessment?
2. What are the types of reading comprehension difficulties they face?
3. What are the possible reasons for the difficulties identified in (2)?

1.4 Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study is its small sample size; involving only a small number of pupils from one class within one school year and from one urban school. As such,

the findings of this study do not reflect the entire Malaysian Year Four population with reading comprehension difficulties; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other settings. Only a small sample size is used because this study is an exploratory study, the findings of which will help identify specific aspects to consider for an extended study in the future. No pilot test was conducted due to time constraints. The subjects in this study do not represent the majority of the Malaysian primary school pupils as the school is a national school in an urban area with a mix of pupils from urban and rural settings.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study may provide some valuable insights to parents and teachers as to the types of reading comprehension difficulties and the possible reasons of reading comprehension difficulties their children or pupils might be facing. It is especially significant to teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) as the findings of this study may provide further understanding concerning their pupils' difficulties in reading and comprehending texts as learners of English as a foreign/second language. This, in turn, will help teachers and parents devise more appropriate and effective teaching methods as well as the needful intervention and remediation strategies so that the pupils concerned may have the means to improve their reading comprehension skills specified in the English Language syllabus, and the pupils who are at risk may be helped before their problems become more serious.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides a brief overview of the study including the role of English in Malaysia and the importance of reading comprehension abilities in the English Language. Reading comprehension difficulties often go undetected due to the large student- teacher ratio, particularly in urban schools and the reading comprehension skill must be given due attention so that proper intervention may be put into practice to enhance reading comprehension among primary school pupils. The next chapter will discuss current research findings and literature pertaining to reading comprehension difficulties.