

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

**Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distant view of close things.
(Miyamoto Musashi)**

1.1 Background of the Study

Malaysia's aspiration for the millennium poses new challenges for the country especially the education sector. As Malaysia strives to achieve the objectives of Vision 2020, the competence of the workforce will be of paramount importance. Education plays an instrumental role in developing a competent workforce. Students must be equipped with skills needed to face the challenges brought about by rapid and inevitable change. The influx of information brought about by technological advancement requires students to be able to learn independently, to be equipped with thinking skills and to be familiar with Information Technology. The roles of teachers and learners are gradually changing. The teacher is no longer viewed as the fount of knowledge and students are no longer passive receivers of information. Rather, the teacher acts more as a facilitator, motivator, and a guide. Learners, on the other hand, are relying less on the teacher as a transmitter of information. They can access all kinds of information from various sources. They must be skillful in coping with and managing this information and cannot expect to be spoon-fed.

With the change in the roles of teachers and learners, it is imperative that we understand the learners and teachers better. One way to do this is to conduct classroom-based research.

Many issues regarding the classroom need to be studied in the classroom itself in order to understand classroom processes better. One important aspect is the perceptions of learners and teachers about classroom processes. It is important to find out how they view the classroom processes within which they operate. Much of our understanding of classroom processes are those which have been articulated or concluded by teachers. This is especially evident in the Malaysian context where due to cultural, social and other factors, the classroom is still very much teacher-centred. Hanafi (1997) says the following about the Malaysian classroom;

“Today, teacher-dominated classrooms with the traditional chalk-and-talk method are very much in evidence. The challenge of the future is the ability of teachers to create opportunities in the classroom for “authentic” communication to take place. Teachers should not monopolize interaction thus reducing Teacher Talk Time (TTT)...”

Often times, it is the teacher who plans the syllabus, the teacher who decides how the class events will unfold and the teacher who describes what he feels the students have learned. The students are seldom if not never, consulted on how they think learning should take place.

The need to look into and inside a Malaysian classroom is prompted by the constant need to speak on behalf of learners who are so often unfairly judged in departmental meetings.

“So and so is lazy.”

“So and so is always asleep in class.”

“So and so will never say a word in English.”

These are but a few comments commonly heard in meetings, some even in senate meetings. How unfair it is to make judgments based on one-sided observations.

How can we uncover the minds of our students? How can we touch their hearts? Are they really lazy or are we not motivating enough as teachers? Why do students sleep in class? Are they tired or are the teachers tiring? Do students view the same classroom processes the same way as the teacher? If so, how do they coincide? If not, how do they differ? What are the 'hidden agendas' (Nunan, 1989) of our learners? How can we turn these hidden agendas into shared agendas, agendas which promote better teaching and learning? These are some of the questions which have motivated the researcher to conduct this study.

It is important to know how students feel about their experience in class as they undergo the classroom processes. This study seeks to find out the affective factors which function as undercurrents in the interaction between the participants in a classroom. It is hoped that by studying these two important issues i.e. perceptions and affective factors, it is possible to get a better understanding of the classroom processes and eventually a better understanding of the dynamics of learning and teaching.

The need to study the different perceptions of teachers and learners was additionally prompted by the idea that although learning is the goal of teaching, what is taught is not necessarily learned. This study was undertaken to document the 'mismatch' between the learner and teacher belief systems. This study was undertaken to better comprehend the feelings that learners bring into the classroom in the hope that a better grasp of events in the classroom could bring the teacher to a

higher level of professionalism. This study is undertaken to listen to the inner voices of the learners to rightly accord them their rights as participants of a language classroom.

Classroom-based or classroom-centred research is described by Allwright and Bailey (1991) as follows:

“Classroom-centred research is just what it says it is –research centred on the classroom, as distinct from, for example, research that concentrates on the inputs to the classroom (the syllabus, teaching materials, etc.) or on the outputs from the classrooms (learner test scores). It does not ignore in any way or try to devalue the importance of such inputs and outputs. Instead classroom research simply tries to investigate what actually happens inside the classroom. At its most narrow, it is in fact research which treats classroom interaction as virtually the only subject worthy of investigation.”

1.2 Purposes of the Study

This study is conducted with two main purposes. One purpose of the study is to obtain written accounts of the perceptions of the learners and teacher regarding each lesson of an English proficiency class. It is hoped that by documenting and analyzing their perceptions, we could better understand what makes the students ‘tick’ i.e. what activities do they think contribute to their learning of the English language, and we could also gain insights of the learners’ focus of concern. The study will establish how the perceptions of the learners and teacher coincide or differ. It is important to compare how learners and teachers view a lesson as a better

understanding of how their perceptions differ and coincide can help us manage the classroom dynamics.

The second purpose of the study is to identify the affective factors felt by the teacher and the learners during class. It intends to explore the feelings of participants of each lesson. It aims to find out how learners react to a particular activity and how they feel about the learning process. It also aims to find out what brings about positive feelings about the lesson and what brings about negative feelings about a lesson. In short, it aims to identify factors which influence the teacher's and learners' experience in learning a second language. An analysis of these affective factors should, it is felt, be able to describe the mood prevalent in the English proficiency class. Some indications of what contributes to learning could perhaps be detected from the study. With these purposes in mind, the following research questions are postulated:

1. How do the perceptions of learners and teacher coincide or differ?
2. What affective factors are evidenced in the diaries?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The result of this study will be a valuable resource to English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and learners. The study hopes to add more input into what is often described as a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of a language classroom. The study will describe how the perceptions of students and teacher regarding a lesson coincide or differ. Thus it will enable us to establish whether the learner's agenda is understood and addressed by the teacher. It will enlighten us on the importance of listening to the students' voices if the Malaysian classroom is to

progress towards learner-centeredness. Learner-centeredness which entails focusing on the learner, has been aptly described by Larsen-Freeman(1998) as a situation whereby language learners are perceived as whole people with behavioral, cognitive, affective, social, experiential, strategic and political dimensions.

Secondly, this study hopes to throw some light on affective factors in an English proficiency classroom. It aims to describe how students feel about classroom processes and to find out what affects the students' feelings in the classroom. It hopes to delve into the 'mood' of a classroom in order to provide a vivid description of the affective elements that teachers and learners bring into and out of the classroom. Teachers will have more ideas on what affective factors are prevalent and what issues are of concern to the students. And learners can read about how other learners feel in an English Proficiency class.

This study will also be significant in that it can show how the diary can be used as a tool to provide more insights on learning and teaching English as a second language. It can also show how the diary study as a tool in action research can help teachers and learners to make immediate decisions regarding language learning and teaching. Thus, the use of the diary as a teacher's aid will allow the teacher, to accommodate students' learning styles and to promote students' involvement, among other things.

In short, this study will be significant in that it will document the 'inner voices' of the participants of an English proficiency classroom so that we hear their praises and their grouses, their triumphs and their adversities, their frustrations and their happiness, if at all they would want to share with us. The study can help us

understand the affective, social, experiential and strategic dimensions of the whole learner.