

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The English language is considered as “the most valuable legacy of the British colonial government in Malaysia” (Asmah, 1982: 53). It is indeed an asset to Malaysians since English language provides an avenue to international relations and advancement in science and technology. Furthermore, the Malaysian government has set itself a vision - Vision 2020 – by which Malaysia hopes to achieve a fully developed status by the year 2020. Such a target reinforces the need to equip the younger generation with adequate knowledge of this language to confidently face the developed nations. Armed with the knowledge of a prominent international language, the nation can expect continued growth and advancement in the country.

1.1 Status of English Language in Malaysia

English is a compulsory second language taught in Malaysian schools. It has been considered valuable to acquire this language for international communicational purposes and as a tool to link with the latest development in science and technology. Even though in government administration English has receded in its role and status,

it remains a familiar medium in the private sector. Academically English is not the medium of instruction but nonetheless it was made a compulsory second language by The Razak Report 1956. Hence, English is taught in all national type schools as the second most important language.

The transition of the status of English from medium of instruction to second language has resulted in unfavourable side effects. Deterioration in standard was observed in the '70s and early '80s. However, this decline is being arrested and a greater emphasis is being accorded to enhance the standard of English in Malaysia.

Zaidan (1993) has suggested various reasons for the awareness of the need to upgrade the standard of English in Malaysia. Among them is one very relevant to this new millennium – the use of English to gain access to knowledge and information to achieve Vision 2020. The country has to consider a global view of its progress. A greater communication with other developed nations is vital to be able to compete on par with them.

In view of this predicament, two obvious measures were implemented to encourage a higher standard of English in schools. The Form Five syllabus was upgraded in 1997 to prepare the students to sit for the E1119 English Language paper in SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia). The latest addition is MUET (Malaysian University English Test) which has been introduced as a measure to enhance the standard of English of future undergraduates.

As discussed earlier, English plays an important role as a medium to gain knowledge and information. This role can be realised through reading. The acquisition of reading skills is indeed the most vital as compared to the other skills

(listening, speaking and writing). Hence, a greater emphasis on it can be foreseen in the future in the Malaysian education scene.

1.1 Second Language Learning

Language acquisition refers to a natural subconscious process that leads to gradual development of language ability by using it naturally in communicative situations. On the contrary, learning occurs when a second language (L2) learner has conscious control over the use of the linguistic rules and structures. The first language (L1) is acquired as a child from birth by hearing and using it. On the other hand, the L2 language is normally learned through formal teaching at schools at a later period of time. The L2 learner who lacks the exposure to L2 during their critical period (from birth to 12 years old) may encounter barriers in learning L2 (Bock-Mi Lee, 1996).

Second language learning for some is only for a few hours of formal instruction in a week (about 3 hours 20 minutes in most Malaysian schools). These learners lack the opportunity to interact regularly in a natural manner. Through these few hours of instruction, very little input can be provided by the ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers and this may result in meaningless learning if the input is irrelevant to the learner's daily language needs. In fact, the need for learning L2 diminishes if L1 suffices the learner's usual interactional needs in society.

The second language learning problem becomes worse during the learner's teenage years. A strong self-consciousness or social identity is evident among older L2 learners. They tend to develop a negative attitude towards the culture of the target

language for fear of losing their cultural and social values. They feel threatened and lack the openness to L2 features.

However, Hammerly (1994) states that L2 learners possess a higher degree of cognitive development when they begin formal instruction in the second language but take a long time to learn the target language. The L2 learners are not exposed to the naturalistic surroundings with native speakers of that language for them to experiment what has been taught and the need does not arise for them to use the L2 language in their environment.

In addition, the way in which children are exposed to their first language differs markedly from the way they are exposed to a second language. L1 learning is usually in a naturalistic environment whereas L2 is learnt in a formal setting and this too could lead to problems. As Brown (1994: 38) states:

children acquire their first language easily and well, yet the learning of a second language, particularly in an educational setting, often meets with great difficulty and sometimes failure.

This suggests a closer look should be taken at how the first language is learnt in order to facilitate second language learning.

1.3 Role of Reading in ESL

Language learning involves acquiring four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. As suggested earlier, reading is the most important skill for students who learn the language as a second language. This is mainly because of the

majority of second language learning situations that students encounter do not expose them to hearing or speaking the language in a naturalistic environment. Reading in that language reveals the culture of the target language and this helps them understand what is being taught. Meaningful reading therefore becomes a tool that enables one to extract information on any subject.

Undeniably, reading is an essential skill for any individual to participate effectively in a community. Learning to read is a lifelong investment with increasing returns for both the individual and society in terms of knowledge expansion. Reading facilitates effective daily living and it “fulfills emotional and spiritual needs as well” (Harris & Sipay, 1980: 2). A literate society will definitely be of advantage to a developing nation, like Malaysia, when dealing with the global community.

Reading has been considered one of the most productive processes to produce informed and imaginative minds. “Reading develops [students who have] complacent minds” (Robinson, 1965: 1). Such being the significance of reading to an individual, the first and foremost implication is to equip every student of a school with reading skills for a productive life ahead. He also adds that reading is a source of enrichment of experiences and pleasure, which improves one’s personality, sensibility and intelligence. Reading is certainly a powerful tool to have to come to grips with the abundance of information before us.

Krashen (1989) emphasises the power of reading in relation to language development. He adds that reading has a great influence on language development to attain academic success in schools. Exposure to language through reading has a greater impact on overall language proficiency. Reading extensively can increase a learner’s command of the language and produce efficient ESL readers. They develop

a flexibility in performing all reading-related tasks with speed and comprehension (Yue, 1994).

Such being the power of reading, it is not surprising to note the importance given to reading in the Malaysian Secondary English Language Syllabus (1988) that stresses the role of reading in language proficiency. Based on this policy, teachers are expected to provide meaningful reading lessons that develop students' reading abilities for them to be independent readers. According to Goodman (1992), schools should adopt the role of reconstructing society apart from preparing students for their future social roles. This means an individual needs to be equipped with skills to survive in a world of modern innovations and this obviously calls for reading skills.

Currently, a child of three years who is able to read is no longer a rare phenomenon. More and more children are reading before they even begin their formal schooling. Yet, it is indeed very disheartening to discover that some secondary school students exhibit reading problems and some are even nonreaders. What could have created such a contrasting situation? It is indeed amazing to have students at the secondary and even tertiary level lag in reading ability. It could be a case of unmet needs.

1.4 Background of the Study

On the 18th of December 1976, the National Association for Remedial Education, Malaysia (NAREM) was established. The emphasis began for remedial awareness among primary school teachers leading to the training of selected teachers in remedial education. However, the number of teachers trained did not meet the

needs of all the primary schools in Malaysia and many schools did not have such a programme (Chua, 1978).

Whether due to the lack of trained remedial teachers or other factors, we have reading problems creeping into secondary schools. If appropriate measures are not taken, the problem will pose a negative impact on society. Teachers in secondary schools face these students and their efforts can help bridge the gap if they know how to handle these students. Educators first need to identify the nature of this problem and then look for remedies.

In a paper presented at an ELT seminar, it was said that matriculation students were having reading problems (Razak Dali & Sharifah Shipak Aidid, 1991). Based on their observation of these students (Form Five school leavers), the researchers concluded that students at the secondary school level are not being adequately exposed to reading materials. They were found lacking in the reading skills to handle texts beyond the secondary level. Again this issue concerning secondary school students and undergraduates having reading problems was brought up in the Sunday Star (May, 1998, p.5):

Secondary school students and even undergraduates lack reading skills and strategies as they are not taught to handle high-level reading, a language centre lecturer said yesterday. Associate Prof. Dr. Haji Razak Dali of Universiti Sains Malaysia's language centre said there was a need to station reading specialists in schools to address the issue....

Having realised the prevalence of reading problems among secondary school students, it is timely to know what these problems are and how they are being handled in the classroom. Teachers, being the central figure in any classroom, would have a tremendous effect on them. It has been found that teachers' attitudes are significant in the problem of predicting the kind of environment that exists in an ESL classroom (Noran Fauziah, 1988).

A closer look at teachers' attitudes and practices in handling students with reading problems will help us give constructive ideas for the future. Morris, Ervin and Conrad (1996) did a case study on a 6th grade student reading at 2nd grade level. They found that the problem reader was able to read at 4th grade level fluently after two years of remedial instruction. They emphasised that many students like this have the potential to progress if supplied the proper instruction by teachers. The teachers need to recognise this type of students and undertake the appropriate measures to modify their reading instruction.

A study by Ellett (1992), showed that teachers in secondary schools encounter the problems of large class sizes which hinders them from taking time to identify and correct negative reading behaviour. The Malaysian context is not much different. Very often the classrooms consist of nearly 50 students and apart from that, the teachers are usually burdened with other non-academic duties such as sports activities and numerous clerical tasks. In this study, Ellett also found that these secondary school teachers were willing to provide reasonable changes within their limits in their instructional approaches when dealing with students with reading problems.

Students with reading problems need to be attended to urgently as they may fall further behind their peers (Stanovich, 1986). Their reading deficiencies may be accumulated each year and one deficiency will lead to another. Many parties are involved in accommodating the needs of students with reading problems. If all quarters do their part, these problem readers may experience success in their reading attempts.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

Reading problems among students is steadily growing and lately drawing the attention of educationists who wish to address the problem as early as possible. Though all quarters desire an early resolution and recognise the benefits of early remediation, somehow these problems have extended to the secondary level. It is indeed an urgent educational problem that has not been remedied at the primary level.

Some students have been identified as poor readers and probably have been referred to a remedial teacher at the primary level, but their needs were unmet and kept growing. Despite the emphasis of the “3R skills” (Reading, Writing and Arithmetics) in the KBSR (New Curriculum for Primary Schools), students come to Form One with gross reading problems and further create the inability to participate effectively in classroom activities.

Furthermore, students in secondary schools are in their teenage years and going through physical, emotional and social changes that give rise to personality problems in addition to reading problems. As a result of these, they find it difficult to

face their problems or seek help. They fail their examinations, develop behavioural problems and are unable to function as a student.

The nature of reading problems is complex and varies in degree with various kinds of deficiencies. The focus of the deficiencies is the extrinsic factors, or in other words, it excludes physiological factors. Identification is crucial, as it will determine the type of treatment required. These students have to be picked out and given the necessary skills to progress in their education. This study intends to look into the current practices of teachers and how this could be modified to benefit all concerned.

1.6 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to highlight the plight of students in urban secondary schools who have reading problems. They have been through a minimum of 6 years of schooling and still continue to struggle to read and understand texts. Their situation is either the result of neglect or lack of awareness in the educational system.

The purpose of this study is to identify the type of reading problems teachers encounter with the students in the classroom and to focus on the teachers' attitudes and practices in handling such students. It is aimed at giving some insights into the treatment of students with reading problems.

It also attempts to look into areas of possible remediation that a teacher could implement in the classroom to equip students with skills to help them overcome their reading problems.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the nature of reading problems present in secondary school students in an urban setting.
2. To probe into teachers' attitudes when facing students with reading problems.
3. To investigate the current practices of teachers in handling such students.
4. To provide guidelines for remediating reading problems among secondary school students.

1.6.1 Research Questions

This study attempts to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the reading problems among secondary school students in an urban setting?
2. What are ESL teachers' attitudes towards students with reading problems?
3. What are the measures taken by ESL teachers in handling students with reading problems?
4. How can reading problems among secondary school students be remedied?

1.7 Definition of Terms

The various terminology used throughout the course of this study is explained in this section to clarify the focus of this research.

1.7.1 Reading Difficulties

The term “reading problem” has been described as reading disability in many cases. McCormick (1995) has used literacy problem as a synonym for reading disability. Harris & Sipay (1980) have adopted a similar description by using reading disability to mean all kinds of reading problems. But this interchangeable description does not give an accurate picture of students who have reading problems but are not disabled readers. Taylor, Harris, Pearson & Garcia (1995) have also used the term reading difficulty to encompass all kinds of reading problems.

To counter this, Aaron & Joshi (1992) have made a distinction between reading disability based on causal factors. They define reading disability as reading problems caused by intrinsic factors such as physiological or psychological factors and reading difficulty as reading problems due to extrinsic factors such as educational and sociological factors. Dauzat & Dauzat (1981) define reading problems as those caused by physiological factors, psychological factors, sociological factors and educational factors. This study will adopt the term reading difficulty based on Dauzat & Dauzat’s definition but excluding physiological factors. As such, the investigation will be confined to psychological, sociological and educational factors.

1.7.2 Problem Readers

The term “problem readers” refers to students with reading problems caused by educational, psychological or sociological factors and who are deficient in either

word-recognition or comprehension skills or both. The degree of their reading problems varies. They do not possess any other learning problems besides reading difficulty. They show potential for improvement if enrolled in a remedial reading programmed.

1.7.3 Remedial Reading

Remedial reading refers to special reading instruction given to children who are not progressing in learning to read as expected of their age and grade level (Harris & Sipay, 1980). Remedial reading sessions are carried out with one child or with a small group. Remedial reading instruction involves diagnosis of individual reading needs and adjustments are made to reading instructions to suit the remedial readers' needs. In other words, diagnostic teaching is a vital component of remedial reading. Remedial reading instruction can be provided within a classroom situation or individualised instruction.

1.8 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has discussed the aims, rationale and purpose of the study, which are supported by some existing theories by research carried out in this field. These theories will be elaborated in the following chapter.