

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

I believe that every child can learn to read and write. Yet not every child who has passed through my fingers had become a successful reader and writer by the end of his/her schooling life eleven years later. My frustration mounted because of the difficulties I was experiencing with poor readers and writers at the secondary school where I teach. I realise I have failed in developing my struggling students' capabilities and capacities in writing. My learners and I did not experience the things Lamott (1995) talks about:

. . . writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward (p. xxvi) . . . writing brings with it so much joy, so much challenge. It is work and play together (p. xxiv).

Dorn (1998, p.ix) says "the teacher's role in mediating learning through language and appropriate literacy opportunities to enable every child to reach his/her highest potential" is mostly never realized in the realities of the classroom. "The classroom as learning communities in which children are accepted no matter where they are on the continuum of reading and writing development" seems more of a myth (French, 1998 p.xiii). Teacher talk reveals that what teachers do is pitch their lessons to cater to the average group leaving learners from both ends of the continuum mostly bored in school. Jones (1998 p. xiii) says that "the children must be recognised as individuals, and

instructions should be designed to accommodate their learning zones". From my experience, this is merely an ideal, a mission that is hardly put into practice.

While learners from the higher end of the achievement continuum get literacy nourishment from the literacy events at home to sustain and engage their "cognitive and linguistic development and growth" (Heath, 1983), the students from the lower end of the continuum face the challenge of linguistic and cognitive mal-nourishment. These learners have only the school to rely on for a balanced language meal that would feed them and yet at the same time give them the tools to feed themselves in the future.

According to Vygotsky (1978), these learners need adults or more capable peers to work within their learning zones to support and scaffold them until they can function independently, thus enabling them to move to a higher level in cognitive functioning. Hence a pedagogical 'detour' as proposed by Cazden (1993) is recommended to accommodate these disadvantaged learners, to give them a chance to have had learning meaningful, a chance to feel they too matter despite Jeremy Bentham's maxim, 'the greatest good for the greatest number'.

In an attempt to capture the "joy and playfulness of learning to read and write" (Lamott, 1995), I embedded my 'instructional detour' (Cazden, 1995) in a Vygotskian perspective. According to this viewpoint, cognitive development and social interaction are perceived as complementary processes that work together to promote the child's intellectual growth (Vygotsky, 1978). These ideas are supported by the work of Rogoff (1990), who emphasises the importance of social interaction for stimulating children's cognitive growth through guided participation in structured literacy activities. Lamott

(1995) too says that "beginner writers are learning to play, and they need encouragement to keep their hands moving across the page". With this in mind, I decided to investigate the genre approach to reading and writing.

Genre approach to reading and writing, a structured reading and writing activity, is basically an intervention, an alternative plan, a pedagogical 'detour' (Cazden 1993), to help students to read and write before they slip through our education system and are forever lost, 'blind' in this world of words. It is a plan to give them the keys and to reveal to them 'the how' to unlock the mysteries of reading and writing.

Besides that, reading and writing are no longer regarded as simply cognitive skills to be learned separately or one after another. Rather, they are viewed as complex interactive and interpretative processes whose development is determined by the social and cultural context (Bruner, 1967 & Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, my case study specifically constitutes an approach where the reading and writing are supportive of each other. Acts of writing borrow and re-combine language gleaned from reading (Oliver, 1999 & William, 1997). Lamott (1995) too articulates the importance of the reading-writing link. She says . . .

. . . becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader, and *that is* the real payoff (p. 10).

She also says that :

. . . becoming a writer can also profoundly change your life as a reader. One reads with a deeper appreciation and concentration, knowing now how hard writing is . . . You begin to read with a writer's eyes." (p. 233)

Hence, in this case study, I hope to identify and articulate the transitions that occur as my learners become more competent readers and writers. I also attempt to gain insights regarding the reading-writing connection.

### **1.1 Context of the Study**

The smooth road to success in schools is to have an environment at home that closely matches that of the school (Fields & Spangler, 2000). I have noticed that "those who have the easiest time are generally children who talk like the teacher, who have been involved with books and writing at home, whose parents have values similar to the teacher's" (Heath, 1983). But what about the children who haven't had this home literacy model? A question I asked myself many times, a question that got drowned by the voices of the majority, the large group of average students. The ones in dire need of help are the ones at the lower end of the continuum who do not have this 'easiest time'. Their early enculturation is not framed in any literacy event (Heath, 1983). Whatever it is that mainstream school-oriented homes have, these learners' homes do not have; thus these learners who are not from the literate tradition are not likely to succeed in school. I realise that these learners need to have the mainstream or school habits presented in familiar activities with explanations related to their own habit of "taking meaning from the environment" (Farr & Daniels, 1986).

For many learners, the classroom is the crucial setting in which writing is learned and practised. Those advantaged children who are exposed to a variety and complexity of interaction, who engage in conversations, and who talk about and share books, have a

distinct advantage in terms of resources for writing, when they enter school (Fields & Spangler, 2000).

Berthoff (1981) looks at the context of composing, the world in which and on which students work and says that, "student writers can be taught to make more personally satisfying use of their meaning-making powers in language. For this to happen, a more directive pedagogy is favoured". She calls it 'assisted invitations' to composing.

Not many students can count on out-of-school experiences to compensate for the shortcomings of their schooling, in their homes, families and communities. These learners have fewer literacy resources to draw upon than students from mainstream backgrounds. These less privileged students need to have a relationship with the kind of writing teacher Perl (1980) describes: "a person who recognises that growing up in a non-mainstream household does not necessarily prevent a child from becoming a good reader and writer".

I see the crucial need to reach out to students with 'assisted invitations' (Berthoff, 1981). These students "come to the task of learning how to write with a somewhat weaker foundation in two areas - technical skill in reading, and knowledge of forms of written language gained from reading" (Farr & Daniels, 1986). Thus, if Bereiter & Scardamalia (1984) are right - "that children use internalized literary schemata in their writing" - then this would seem to handicap my students who read poorly and sparsely.

According to Harste, Woodward & Bruke (1984), children need a relatively small amount of raw material to learn from; they do not need to be heavily bombarded with

print input in order to start unraveling the puzzle of literacy for themselves. Cazden (1993) too says that simply immersing children in literacy-rich environments is not enough to offset the difficulties of struggling readers and writers.

Hence, I see genre approach to writing as 'assisted invitations' (Berthoff, 1981), my deliberate pedagogical 'detour' (Cazden, 1993). I see it as an enabling approach, the significant experience, the connecting tissue, the temporary crutch that I believe will jumpstart the writing process. According to Vygotsky (1978), "higher levels of understanding occur as a result of assisted performance in the zone of proximal development". This means that what the learner was able to accomplish with assistance yesterday becomes the independent level today, moving the learner to a higher level of intellectual development. Genre approach to writing is the 'assistance' these learners need to achieve better standards in writing.

Genre approach to writing is, I feel, another route forward for these struggling writers who have been encountering numerous dead ends in their composing journey. Furthermore, Rogoff (1990) says that, "as adults and children engage in interactive oral discussions about written language, children acquire important tools for the mind". Genre theory, I feel, places importance on explicit demonstrations and active engagements (Calkins, 1994). I believe that the tenets of this theory are capable of awakening and guiding my learners' literacy development to a higher level.

This view is also supported by Kress (1982) who says that much of the success in achieving full command of the written language rests on the child's mastery of the concept of sentence on the one hand and *of the genres* in which written language occurs

on the other. The lack of opportunity to read models or samples of the specific sorts of writing I have been assigning has not assisted my struggling writers. Thus my emergent writers spend much time groping in the dark, trying to imagine or invent the conventions of an assigned genre, when I had, in the words of Calkins (1994) "unintentionally withheld the opportunity to absorb the characteristics of the form". All this clearly implies that I should foster reading experiences as an integral part of my writing instruction. I have come to see that reading and writing actually play complementary roles and scaffold each other. This is also the very essence of genre literacy.

I have therefore adopted 'genre literacy in my case study because as Murphy (1993) says, "genre literacy makes explicit the way language works to make meaning through different genres". I see that genre theory also "stresses the social context and communicative role of language in contrast to the 'process' learning model where language is seen to be learnt naturally, almost by osmosis, given the right experience" (Bizzell, 1986). Genre theory actually "emphasises the social structures that in turn structure language use" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Hence, rather than language acquisition being a 'natural' process of osmosis, I strongly believe that it *has to be* really highly interventionist for my learners. I have only "a small fraction of the time for individual language interaction that parents from the mainstreams' literate tradition have" (Farr & Daniels, 1986). For this reason, I have come to realise that my teaching strategies in my classroom must be far more explicit and efficient than what is happening now because of the lack of 'literate tradition' in the non-mainstreams' homes.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Erik, Jenitaa, Elena and Katrena, the participants of my case study, like the many emerging writers we have in our primary schools, are caught up in the challenges, realities and limitations of the ESL writing classroom; caught up also in an environment and approach that neither supports nor encourages writing. The excerpt below captures this dilemma.

- Me* : *Just now you were talking about head, body, leg. Can you tell us more?*
- Elena* : *Head is the start . . . body is . . .*
- Erik* : *Body is the isi-isi penting*
- Jenitaa* : *. . . and leg is the fourth paragraph....*
- Me* : *Where did you learn this from?*
- Jenitaa* : *In school*
- Me* : *So it is important to have head, body, leg when you write an essay*
- Jenitaa* : *Ya*
- Me* : *Who told you that it's important?*
- Jenitaa* : *My teacher*
- Me* : *Your teacher?*
- Jenitaa* : *My Chinese teacher*
- Me* : *Your Chinese teacher. Not your Malay teacher? English teacher?*
- Jenitaa* : *No*
- Me* : *What did your Malay teacher and English teacher tell you all when you write essay?*
- Jenitaa* : *My English teacher never wrote . . . er. . . **never taught us***



*to write essay before and my Malay teacher . . . you know . . . in Chinese school . . . they just give the isi-isi penting and don't tell you anything at all*

*Me : Oh, I see . . .*

*Jenitaa : So you don't . . . you just have to do it and teacher gives you time and the time up . . . time's up, you haven't finish you get whacking . . . so we do it fast.*

*Katrena : I haven't wrote any essay in school, teacher*

*Erik : In my school, teachers tells us ....just join the words under each picture. Short one also can.*

Like many teachers, I too have been setting aside every week two out of five periods for some sort of writing task. I would write a topic on the blackboard, spend a few minutes discussing with my students what I want them to write concerning the topic. After that I would instruct them to start writing and to hand in the finished product at the end of the period or the following day. At the end of the composing task, my learners end up getting neither wiser nor enlightened for they *just have to do it* (Jenitaa).

Figure 1 from the 2002 UPSR exam paper presents the one and only writing task learners are taught and examined in most primary schools. The format of the writing component in the UPSR English Language examination paper, question 22 to be precise, has become the template for the teaching of writing which many primary school teachers strictly adhere to.

Figure 1: Question 22 of the 2002 UPSR English Language Examination

**SULIT** 014 014

Bahasa Inggeris  
September 2002  
1 Jun

No. Surat Beranak ..... Angka Giliran .....

**LEMBAGA PEPERIKSAAN**  
**KEMENTERIAN PENDIDIKAN MALAYSIA**

**UJIAN PENCAPAIAN SEKOLAH RENDAH 2002**

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**BAHASA INGGERIS**

Satu jam

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**JANGAN BUKA KERTAS SOALAN INI SEHINGGA DIBERITAHU**

- Kertas soalan ini mengandungi tiga bahagian yang terdiri daripada 22 soalan.
- Jawab semua soalan.
- Jawapan hendaklah ditulis di ruang yang disediakan dalam kertas soalan.
- Kertas soalan ini hendaklah diserahkan sebaik-baik sahaja ujian ini selesai.
- Anda hendaklah menggunakan pensel 2B atau HB.

| Untuk Kegunaan Pemeriksa |         |        |
|--------------------------|---------|--------|
| Bahagian                 | Soalan  | Markah |
| A                        | 1 – 10  |        |
| B                        | 11 – 15 |        |
|                          | 16 – 20 |        |
| C                        | 21      | A      |
|                          |         | B      |
|                          |         | 22     |
| <b>JUMLAH BESAK</b>      |         |        |

Kertas soalan ini mengandungi 13 halaman bercetak dan 3 halaman tidak bercetak.  
(Lihat sebelah **SULIT**)


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**SULIT** 12 014


**Question 22**

The pictures below describe what Encik Maslan and his family did last Sunday evening. Use all the words given to make sentences to describe the pictures. You may use the words in any order you like to make your description interesting. Write your answer in the space provided.


*Gambar-gambar di bawah menunjukkan apa yang Encik Maslan dan keluarganya lakukan pada petang Ahad yang lalu. Gunakan semua perkataan yang diberi untuk membina ayat-ayat berdasarkan gambar-gambar tersebut. Anda boleh menggunakan perkataan-perkataan yang diberi dalam pelbagai susunan bagi menghasilkan penerangan yang menarik. Tuliskan jawapan anda di ruang yang disediakan.*



(a)  
Last Sunday evening - Encik Maslan - family - went - circus - bought tickets



(b)  
clapped - cheered - excited - horses - stole



(c)  
After - went - dinner - tired - happy

From their upper primary school days (standards 4-6), the majority of the learners between ages of 10-12 are only initiated to this kind of writing task. They are given pictures with short notes below them and are expected to expand these into sentences and paragraphs. The only guide these learners get from the teachers is that an essay must have 'head, body and legs' (Jenitaa). Because they do not have much of a literacy or literary resource to rely on, most of the learners 'just join the words to make sentences' (Erik).

Another cause for contention is the way reading and writing have been handled in our English language learning classroom. Reading and writing have been separated in our present curriculum and classroom work. For example, in the unit on animals in the KBSR syllabus, learners read about fables but proceed to carry out an exercise on note expansion related to facts about animals or the other way round (Appendices A1- A). Although fables and facts about animals are thematically linked, the reading done in class does not scaffold the writing experience. From a genre perspective, this separation makes little sense. Acts of writing borrow and re-combine language gleaned from reading (Oliver, 1999). Williams (1997) also supports this. He says, "encouraging students to make as many links as possible between their reading and writing in a particular genre, as well as between different genres, goes some way of breaking down this artificial separation".

Ananda (2000) states that "students who are able to understand the writer's thinking processes and their own thinking processes related to the material they are reading, tend to have a higher level of comprehension of the passage". Lamott (1995) asserts that "becoming a writer is about becoming conscious" a concept Caudrey (1998) feels involves "becoming aware of" and "taking into account" "genre-related features which in turn would enhance the learners' reading and writing skills. Genre analysis, Paltridge (1996) asserts, provides students with a complete view of the discourse components of texts as they provide extremely useful textual information.

It is with all this in mind that I decided to focus on one genre, the fable. Fables are part of the reading diet of many children. It is situated in their world of childhood and it is also nested within the KBSR English Language Syllabus in the unit on animals.

I have used Chapman's distinction as an organising principle in planning my intervention programme. According to Chapman (1999), when it comes to genre, it has three interrelated purposes: *learning genres* - widening students' genre repertoires; *learning about genres* - fostering genre awareness and *learning through genre* - using genres as tools for critical thinking and learning in particular situations. Therefore I seek to study and report the exploration of the fable genre, moving between reading and writing experiences. I hope to articulate the transformations that occur as my learners *learn fables, learn about fables and learn through fables*.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Specifically this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How did learning about the fable genre help the learners in writing their own fables?
2. How did learning through the fable genre help support and extend learners' creative and critical thinking?

### **1.4 Significance of Study**

This case study is significant in various aspects. First of all, it will provide an in-depth study of focusing on genre. Analysing and researching genres as one of the dimensions of learning about texts can help raise critical awareness of reading and

writing in the learners. My study hopes to show how genre approach to reading and writing can help my learners become better readers and writers. My study hopes to help learners become empowered readers and writers.

Besides that, this study hopes to show the use of genres as cognitive tools. With this as the basis, genres can be used as ways of teaching thinking and communicating. Students will explore the possibilities of the genre by working creatively within and beyond it.

The information gathered from the study is not a mere specification on the advantages of adopting the genre approach in our teaching and learning. Traditionally, reading and writing have been too often separated in classroom work. Thus this study is significant in helping teachers as well as learners make and see the links between reading and writing. It hopes to offer positive alternatives for the teaching of reading and writing.

The use of models is common in many classrooms but is of limited value because the students only copy them. Hillocks (1986) says that "rather than imitating models, teachers might help students deconstruct and reconstruct them in order to understand and to "own" them." In this way, the use of models may be process-oriented - to foster genre awareness. Hence, the information in this study will also be helpful in evaluating and assessing the usefulness of models.