

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the study

The English Literature component was introduced in the year 2000 into the Form Four and Form I (Secondary Schools) English Language syllabus with the aim of enhancing students' proficiency in the English Language. Through the study of a set of prescribed literary texts (five short stories and six poems for Form Four students) the Ministry of Education hopes that the students' personal development and self enrichment will be enhanced (Ministry of Education, Literature Syllabus, 1999). It is also expected that by reading about other cultures, the students' outlook will be broadened. One of the objectives to be achieved at the end of the literature programme is students will be able to give personal responses to the texts, showing an awareness of how language is used to achieve a particular purpose, for example, to convince someone. What is more important is the development of the students' ability to reflect upon and draw valuable moral lessons from the issues and concerns of life as portrayed in the literary works and relate them to their own life.

Reading and appreciating literary texts involves the processing of meaning and understanding the written texts (Lazar, 1993). Each student may

derive different messages from reading a particular literary text, and this will generate discussions in the classroom. Literature, therefore, can be helpful in the process of language learning, as there will be attempts to produce words and expression which are relevant and significant to the context in the stories. Since the role of the literature component in the educational vision is to produce cultured and informed citizens (Literature Syllabus, Ministry of Education, 1999), it is also envisaged that the component will encourage open-mindedness. In other words, the aim is to produce thinking students who will learn to form their own opinions.

There are a number of different reasons for using literary works in the classroom. According to Collie (1954)) one is to develop competence in language and not so much highlighting the value of literature and the other, is encouraging exposure to different cultures which enables students to understand foreign cultures in addition to their own. Engaging the imagination with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the structure of the language. The Ministry of Education hopes that as a result of the exposure to and appreciation literary texts, the students will continue to read and think critically (Literature syllabus, Ministry of Education, 1999).

It is believed that the literature component can cultivate global-mindedness among students and can lay the basis for a knowledgeable

society which will develop skills such as thinking, research and creativity (Literature Syllabus, Ministry of Education, 1999). The school has been given the role to prepare “knowledgeable students” with the ability to think critically and make discoveries. Our educational vision is to celebrate differences between students that is their unique abilities and aptitudes.

Some of the micro-objectives set in the literature component (English Language Literature syllabus, 1999) which relate to thinking skills are:

1. retelling what the text is about in their (students’) own words
2. discussing the theme and messages
3. discussing the author’s point of view
4. making inferences and drawing conclusions about the theme, message, character and the author’s point of view
5. discussing values explored in the text
6. relate events, characters, values and messages in the texts to one’s own life
7. giving an informed personal response to the text

The aim of including critical thinking skills in the learning outcomes is therefore to encourage students to feel free with the text, to comment, speculate, criticize and above all to give personal views, (English Language Literature Syllabus, 1999).

## 1.2 Statement of The Problem

Language involves a thinking process which allows students to learn and grow intellectually. Schools now need to begin to identify ways to optimize language use to promote higher level thinking and calls are made for teachers to guide students in developing higher level thinking skills. Literature as a subject has its principal aim the development of the capacity for individual response in language use. It is a way of sensitizing students to the cognitive processes of making meaning, comparing and understanding, in other words, thinking about what they read.

However, the crucial question is, how do the students react to this introduction of a new subject – literature, in the syllabus? For active critical thinking to occur, teachers must create an atmosphere which fosters inquiry (Becker, 1989). For this to happen, strategies must be engaged in order to lead the students into the lesson. In most cases in Malaysian Secondary schools students can only respond to literary texts as a result of guidance. What teachers so often do in the English Language classroom is to tell students what messages are to be found in the literary texts they are studying and this discourages them from seeking messages for themselves. The study of literary texts is primarily a study of language use and as such it is not a separate activity from language learning. In addition, literary texts are often viewed as language-learning materials.

Most of the exercises and activities are aimed at helping students learn new vocabulary to extend their existing vocabulary. The criterion for the selection of exercises or for questioning should be one which can be used to develop sensitivity to language in the most effective way. Generally, class hours are not spent in discussion but rather on recitations or reading, and a mere restatement of content rather than analysis. There seems to be an imbalance. Reading a text should introduce the students to four different aspects of reading: skimming, scanning, reading comprehension and critical thinking. What generally happens in the English class that uses literary texts is the coverage of the first three aspects leaving out the fourth aspect. Even if the students understand the basic content of the text and can draw sufficient information from it to answer comprehension questions relating to the descriptive detail it contains, the students may still not understand its character as a literary discourse.

This short study aims to investigate the strategies used by the teachers and to explore the responses of the students to literature lessons in the English classroom, and to document it. The purpose of the study is to investigate the strategies and techniques employed by the teacher in using the prescribed literary texts to develop critical thinking skills among students.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This dissertation seeks to answer the following research questions.

#### **Research Question 1**

*What are the strategies and techniques employed by the teacher in the literature classroom in providing opportunities for students' response in critical thinking skills?*

#### **Research Question 2**

*Which strategy and technique employed by the teacher greatly encourages critical thinking among the students in a literature class?*

#### **Research Question 3**

*What are the factors that influence the students' responses to critical thinking strategies and techniques employed by the teacher in a literature class?*

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The strategies used in teaching the literature component have the potential of developing critical thinking skills among students in an English Language classroom. The findings would enable teachers to consider the

significance of the strategies they use in order to help students to acquire confidence, express views and value their own responses. It is only through well planned strategies that the students will be assisted in developing independent thinking and be more interested and open to other perspectives, be it from individuals or groups.

### **1.5 Limitations of the Study**

This study has the following limitations:

1. The number of respondents to the questionnaire is limited to three classrooms of three different schools. The total number of students involved is ninety-five but of this only twenty questionnaires for each class were analyzed. This is to standardize the number of respondents for each school as the number of students in each of the class differed.
2. Secondly, the study only involves three (3) locations. They are SMK Sultan Abdul Samad, SMK Methodist and SMK Telok Panglima Garang in the district of Kuala Langat. These schools have shown to have students of different levels of English Language proficiency. Therefore, the findings from this study is only localized and cannot be claimed to represent the schools in the nation.

3. In addition, observations on the literature lessons had to be limited to one per class, per school so as not to intrude into the day-to-day affairs of the school on the whole. Therefore, the conclusions are based on these observations only.

However, since the schools chosen are average secondary schools, the researcher concludes that the findings might represent a general overall situation.