CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of literature in English in the Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) context has evolved from being a core part of the school English language curriculum to a split in 1990 where the subject focused only on the language for communicational purposes excluding literature, while in upper secondary, the subject Literature in English was offered as an elective for those interested in taking it. In 1999, the Ministry of Education announced a significant change in English Language Teaching (ELT) policy (KPN/JPNS 2000). The Literature in English component was introduced in the year 2000 into the Form Four and Form One English Language syllabi with the aim of enhancing students' proficiency in the English language. The aim of the component highlights the intentions to enhance students' proficiency in English language through the study of prescribed texts (five short stories and six poems for Form Four students). It also seeks to contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views.

One of the objectives to be achieved at the end of the literature programme is for students to be able to give their personal responses to the texts and also to show an awareness of how language is used to achieve a particular purpose (Sukatan Pelajaran Kesusasteraan Dalam Bahasa Inggeris, 1990, pp. 8-9). Based on my professional experiences as a teacher, many students, however, are far from achieving these objectives in reading literary works for
several reasons. One glaring thing which even some instructors are unaware of is the role of literary competence. Research carried out by Carter and Long (1991) has shown that the study of literature is quite useless if the learner does not possess the literary competency and a certain degree of sophistication and familiarity with the particular cultural conventions as this will make learning the language a "laborious task" (p.24). Language proficiency alone is not sufficient for students to read, understand and appreciate literary works. In fact it is the inability to appreciate literary texts that keeps students away. Their knowledge of language, "would enable them to understand phrases and sentences, but they would not know, quite literally, what to make of [the] strange concatenation of phrases" found in literary texts (Brumfit, 1990, p. 24). Thus, students would be unable to read it as literature because they lack the literary competence which enables others to proceed. They would not have internalised the 'grammar' of literature which would permit them to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings.

Although poetry appreciation is one of the components of the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) Literature in English programme, I have observed that a majority of the upper secondary students dislike and often shy away from poetry. A poem is usually not a favoured item for most ESL students mainly because of its "deviant use" (Widdowson, 1985, p.162) of language. For students, poetry is usually rated as making the least contribution to language skills development and they probably consider it as insignificant to any advancement in their studies or their future careers. This
is the problem that needs to be addressed, arrested and rectified.

Statement of the Problem

It is also through my professional experiences, that I feel that teachers and students alike have often found the teaching and learning of poetry a problem. The density of meaning over language, tone and rhythm, and literary devices are but some of the features that learners have to contend with in interpreting poetry.

Many students, and perhaps even some teachers, associate poetry solely with tasks such as scansion, counting the number of feet in a line, deciphering rhyme schemes and types of rhythm and learning terms such as iambic, assonance, alliteration or onomatopoeia. For some, this is a pleasure, but the effect on others, especially slow learners, may be very negative, making them tune out whenever the word ‘poetry’ is mentioned. Yet others may associate poetry with memorisation tasks that were forced upon them by their teachers. As some teachers have also had this kind of an introduction to poetry, or because they associate poetry with difficult and advanced analysis, they may hesitate to use it in their ESL classrooms. This is, of course, unfortunate because the scholarship in the field suggests that poetry can contribute so much to making any language class enjoyable, but it has even more to offer the ESL classroom in terms of poetry-centered language activities (Vethamani, 2003). There is therefore a need for research to investigate these assertions that poetry can be taught in an effective way in the classroom.
Poetry could also be used as an introduction to the big ‘L’ to students. This is because poems are considered short and it is something that they are familiar with right from nursery through their primary education. By encouraging personal responses to poems, the students’ affective domain is activated and aesthetic values are subtly developed (Vethamani. 1993). The teacher’s task, too, is reduced to listening, responding and coordinating the different interpretations that emerge. In this way poetry can act as a stepping stone to the other genres of literature.

In relation to rural students, as I have observed as a teacher of English in Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) Aman Stesyen (all names of places and persons are pseudonyms), they have a preconceived fear of poetry. This could be due to the linguistic complexities of poems which may constitute an insurmountable obstacle for the students. Reading a poem that is too difficult to understand can be very frustrating for students and can have very negative effects on their motivation to read more. Cultural elements embedded in literary texts may also pose additional difficulties on students, especially if they are geographically and socioculturally remote from the realities in which the poem is set. Linguistic and cultural obstacles may not only remove much of the enjoyment that should come with reading poetry, but they can also cause students to feel disheartened about reading poetry, with detrimental effects for their motivation.
However, as is noted by Hess (2003), “the entry into a poem, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation that almost no other text can produce” (p.19). Thus, this study seeks to explore the use of learner-centred activities using prescribed and selected poems for a Form Four class. These activities were assigned and taught for a period of six weeks in a rural secondary school, which is situated in Sekijang, Johor. In other words, this study investigates the use of different ways and strategies as means of engaging students in interactive and imaginative learning as well as to develop emotional and cultural maturity in them.

Objectives of the Study

The aims of the study were firstly, to find out students' perceptions towards poetry, based on their early experiences with the genre. Furthermore, the study also looked at various approaches in the teaching and learning of literature, poetry in particular, in a Form Four ESL class, based on prescribed as well as other selected poems. The primary aim of these activities was to provide an “entry” (Hess, 2003, p. 19) into the literary texts, and consequently to develop responses, to sensitize the students to the linguistic features in texts, and later to drive at a more complete interpretation and appreciation of the text.

The focus of this study, therefore, was on suggesting an interesting and practical way of introducing poetry to reluctant learners at secondary school level by enhancing the reflective, analytical and expressive abilities of the students in the classroom.
Research Questions

The research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. What are the student and teacher perceptions of teaching and learning poetry in the ESL classroom.

2. How can poetry be taught to reluctant students in a Form Four English as Second Language (ESL)?

3. What are student and teacher perceptions of learning poetry through various learner-centred activities in the English Language classes?

Significance of the Study

By focusing on the opportunities a teacher has for using poetry as a basis for language practice, especially for reluctant learners of poetry in secondary schools, it is hoped that this effort would help teachers to present poetry to students in a more meaningful and purposeful way. Carter and Long (1991) have put forward three tendencies in the utilization of literary texts in language classes, namely for personal growth, cultural awareness and language enrichment. As such the approach and techniques in the teaching of poetry suggested in this study, would not only focus on improving student performances in assessments but also on helping students to indulge in poetry for pleasure and personal growth.

Above all, the activities explored in this study are aimed at encouraging teachers to select appealing literary works which students can identify with and by which they can linguistically and emotionally be stimulated (Vethamani, 2003), so that the chance of teaching-learning process being a responsive,
enjoyable and fruitful one for all parties increases. This in itself would be a motivating factor for students who have usually found poetry a boring subject to study.

Having outlined the framework that will shape my research, I will draw on the relevant conceptual and research literature to further illuminate my study.