

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative case study on exploring reluctant learners' perception of poetry, I sought a better understanding of students' "lived experiences" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 182) with poetry in the classroom.

This chapter discusses the approach and methodology used in conducting this empirical study. After justifying the research approach, a description of the research site, participants, key informants and teacher-researcher will be undertaken. The chapter will then proceed with a description of data collection techniques as well as the data analysis procedures.

The Research Approach

This case study is exploratory in nature, and thus a qualitative research methodology was chosen. A qualitative case study is used here, as an effort to understand reluctant learners' perceptions in the teaching and learning of poetry that takes place in the ESL class (Patton, 1985, p.1). As Patton asserts, I feel that this is an ideal methodology because a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed to arrive at the heart of the issue – what new teaching- learning activities can I negotiate with my reluctant students to make learning more relevant and connected to their world? As the basic goals of teaching poetry are highly subjective, likewise the teaching of poetry to reluctant learners, a notion of central importance to this research, is a personal and elusive concept that does not lend itself easily to numerical metrics. This research is concerned with the

intentions and self-conscious directions embodied in the students and instructors of poetry in *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Aman Stesyen*.

As case studies are also multi-perspective in analyses, as a teacher-researcher, I would consider not just the voice and perspectives of the participants, but also of the relevant groups of participants and the interaction between them. This is a salient point in the characteristic of this case study that gives voice to the powerless and voiceless. In this study, the voices of reluctant learners who are often not heard were captured. The study thus seeks to understand the phenomenon of interest from participants' perspectives that is, the emic, or insider's perspective (Meriam, 1998) by zooming in on students' responses to poems and attending to their words and actions with the purpose of seeing through their eyes. Thus, this study examined and observed interactions and responses of participants to the tasks administered over a period of six weeks.

The Research Site

The research site is the rural town of Aman, in the district of Sekijang which is situated about 15 kilometers from the Sekijang town. Road and rail transport connect Aman with Sekijang. Aman, is a small town made up of two rows of shop houses which cater for the basic needs of the surrounding population. The school itself is located side-by-side with the Aman National primary school and a National Type Chinese primary school. This cluster is fronted with the Aman police station. There is also a railway station smack in

the center of this rural town which contributes to the name of the school involved in the study - SMK Aman Stesyen in Aman.

Basically Aman is made up of a large *FELDA* settlement and the Voules plantation estate which also houses the National type Tamil primary school and a Chinese new village.

The Community

Aman is an agricultural town depending mainly on oil palm and rubber coming from the *FELDA* settlement and the Voules estate. The majority of the people of Aman work in these areas. There are also a small number of people, who are either involved in business or attached to the government sector such as schools and other state departments. It is also interesting to note that traditional village or *kampung* houses were the main form of residence until 1970 when the first housing estate was developed.

Aman has a mixed population of Malays, Chinese and Indians with the majority being the Malays which makes up 59 % of the population with 31 % Chinese , 9 % Indians and 1 % others (Local Council, 2003). Aman has a Chinese primary school, one Tamil primary school and two Malay medium primary schools. The school where this study was conducted is the only secondary school in the area.

It can be noted that education is not given great importance in this little town as there are no tuition centers or any other educational facilities available here. If at all anyone wants to have access to such facilities they have to either go to Sekinchan town which is about 15 km north or Lelayang town which is about the same distance to the south.

This town too has not produced any successful personalities. The English language, therefore, to most residents is still a foreign language . It is not surprising to find that many people neither speak nor understand the language as can be seen when one goes into town either to purchase something or just to drop by. Even Malay, is not fluently spoken by many Chinese and Indians. The use of their mother tongue such as Mandarin, Tamil and Javanese is more prevalent.

The School

The school involved in the study is *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Aman Stesyen*. This school is situated about fifteen kilometers from *Sekinchan* town. It lies along the road leading to *Kampung Chempaka Sari*, *Felda Rendang*, *Pekan Aur* and *Kampung Sawi*. This is the feeder school for all the primary school students from the previously mentioned areas. Being surrounded by rubber trees, the school is isolated. The teachers' quarters is next to the school and it is occupied by teachers from the three schools in the area, namely *SMK Aman Stesyen*, *SK Aman Stesyen* and *SRJK(C) Choo Choo*. The main road leading to the villages and *Felda Rendang* lies close to the school. However, it is not that noisy as the number of vehicles plying the road is rather small. Traffic is only heavy in the mornings when students and teachers come in and in the afternoons when school is over. As many would agree, it is a very peaceful atmosphere befitting the name *Aman* (calm).

The school comprises five blocks of buildings. It is well equipped among others with sufficient classrooms, science laboratories, a library, a living

skills and aquaculture workshops plus a kitchen for food processing. This is a special feature of the school, as it is the one and only school in the district of Sekinchan, which offers Aquaculture and Food Processing as an elective for upper forms. The student population in 1984 (the year the school was founded) was only 309 but now in the year 2005, it has risen to 1457, catering for students from Remove to Form Five.

The school's motto *Cergas Berilmu* (Earnestness in Acquiring Knowledge) has been upheld by teachers and students. The school's performances in public examination have been steadily rising. In 1998, it achieved 64.62% passes for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)* examination while in 2003, the school achieved 95.2%. The passes in The *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)* examination showed an increase from 37.6% in 1998 to 65.3% in 2004. Thus far, the administration has given support and encouragement for the development of English in the school through setting up 'English Paths', that is corridors lined with proverbs and motivational sayings in English. There is also the Self-Access Centre (SAC), a room set up with numerous language activities, games and reading materials to expose students to the language and to encourage them to read materials in English. The English Language Society notice board serves to keep students informed of the latest developments in the world.

The school has also done well in extra curricular activities such as in the Cricket and shooting competitions as well as in sports.

The Participants

In this case study, my own English Language class, namely Form Four Berlian, was chosen to emphasize on an in-depth analysis of a particular instance which will illuminate that interest (Stake, 1995), and this case, reluctant learners of poetry in a Form Four English Language class. Here the focus was on the process, the context and the discovery rather than the outcome itself. Although 39 students of Form Four Berlian participated in this study, the focus was on the reluctant learners of poetry. Thus I selected five key participants and interviewed them for an in-depth study.

In addition, three teachers were also interviewed informally to get their perceptions of poetry as well as their views and experiences with regard to the teaching of poetry.

The Students

The selection of student participants for the study was done on the basis of convenience – convenience sampling (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). This was mainly done to avoid any major reshuffling of the timetable and so that the students too, would not be subjected to undue anxiety. As ‘some dimensions of convenience almost always figures in sample selection’ (Patton, 1995), the fact that I being the form teacher as well as the English language teacher of Form Four Berlian did contribute in some ways to this study. This class was an above average class – the best form four class in the school. Below is a description of the class as well as the key student participants of the study.

This class consists of 39 students who are in the Science and Technology stream. Form Four Berlian is made up of 21 girls - thirteen Malays, seven Chinese and one Indian and 18 boys - fifteen Malays and three Chinese . All the students have been studying in the same school since Form One, except for two new students who came in only this year. In the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)* eight of these students had scored 'A', fifteen obtained 'B', followed by eleven 'C's and five 'D's. Based on these results, one can assert that the students are of a mixed ability as far as English is concerned. Although there are no failures in terms of the examination results, their actual performance from the class tests and school examination results, show that they are not proficient in the English language. This could de-motivate the students and cause problems and difficulties, especially in the learning of poetry.

In the beginning of the year, as a form teacher, I observed that it was difficult to get the students to carry out any duty collectively as they were not willing to work together. This could be due to the fact that they were in different classes when they were in Form Three. However, after much advice and prompting, they were able to work as a team in performing various tasks.

As a teacher-researcher, I explained to the students the purpose and the nature of the study. I obtained their consent to participate in the research. I also explained that I would be using pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and that they can think up of a name for themselves but that it should be relative to the gender and race of the person.

Key Participants

For an in-depth study, five key participants were chosen. The selection of the participants was on a voluntary basis. Although it was voluntary, several criteria were considered such as the gender, ethnicity, attendance and participation in class. These students were chosen also because they were representative of the class as a whole. The five participants comprised of three Chinese girls and two Malay boys. Two girls and one boy were academically at the low end of the average range, whereas one boy and one girl were academically at the high end of the average range. These students were also chosen because they were reliable students who consistently completed their homework; were willing to actively take part in discussions; got along well with each other; and were also willing to compromise with each other. In order to collect the data for this research, these five students stayed together as a group to complete any assigned work. Below is a brief description of each of the key participants.

Mei Mei. Mei Mei is a tall, slim, serious looking Chinese girl with her long hair pulled back in a ponytail. She is one of the top students in class who is always serious about her schoolwork and puts her heart and soul into any assignment given to her. She aspires to be a computer engineer. Her hobbies are playing badminton and computer games. She comes from a large family with ten members. She has four sisters and three brothers and is the eldest child. Her parents are rubber-tappers. “Teacher, poetry has got nothing to do with my ambition”, she quips. Nevertheless she always tries her best, in her exams “to

get all the answers correct” . Her usual cry would be, “teacher correct ah?” when it comes to writing responses to certain lines in a poem. However she enjoys reading Chinese novels and short stories.

Grace. Grace, Mei Mei’s close friend, on the other hand, is a bubbly, lively and ever joyful Chinese girl with sparkling eyes. She is tall, slim and wears her hair just like Mei Mei. She is also a school prefect. Grace has been studying in this school since she was in Form Three. She hails from Seremban, N. Sembilan. Grace’s ambition is to be a doctor. Her father is a teacher while her mother is a housewife. Grace’s proficiency in the English language is much higher than the rest of the class as she speaks English at home most of the time. Her speaking and reading skills are good while her writing skills are average. One of the characteristics that Mei Mei and Grace share in common is a belief that poetry is not relevant in their lives. They will listen to stories read aloud in the classroom and share their own life stories, but as for sitting down and reading through a poem —“forget it, it’s not our kind of thing”

Yan Xin. Yan Xin is a trim-looking girl with short, black hair and an athletic swing to her shoulders, possesses an attractive smile that could catch anyone’s attention. She sits beside Grace in the first row. She lives with her grandmother as her parents are employed in Singapore. Her ambition is to be a doctor. She likes gardening and playing basketball. She is a quiet and hardworking girl. Whenever I start on a poem she would say, “Teacher lets do short stories lah”. She would sit stiff in her chair and stare at the poem as though it was some abstract object. Many a times I had tried to coax her to

respond in her own words to some part of a poem but the usual reply will be, “cannot understand teacher” and frown sheepishly.

Ah Man. Ah Man is a tall, intelligent prefect, who sits alone right at the back of the class. He is cheerful and an extrovert but prefers to work on his own most of the time. He appears timid but when he starts an argument, he does not give up easily. He attempts to speak in English at every given chance. The eldest of three children, his parents pressure him to be a role model to his siblings to which he sometimes retaliates by not doing his homework. His father is a policeman in Aman and his mother is a housewife. His ambition is to be a doctor. During poetry lessons, I observed that he sometimes has a tendency to easily get bored and restless. However, this does not occur as much in other genres such as the short story or excerpts of novel which I use in class.

Faizal. Faizal is short and plump. He comes to school in his *songkok*. He was one of the top scorers in the school for the 2003 *PMR* examination. He is a responsible and hardworking student. His parents are *FELDA* settlers. The eldest of four children, he feels he needs to achieve good results in the examination in order to achieve his ambition, that is to be a computer engineer. According to Faizal, he gets his “quiet” or “my” time by carving his own space and “drowning” himself in activities such as listening to music, reading magazines, watching television, or “escape the world”, through his headphones. He listens to various types of music, from contemporary jazz to neo-soul and Rap. Some of his favorite artists right now are Jill Scott, Alicia Keys, Case and Talib Kweli². He also watches music videos on Video Music or MTV, and

sometimes engages himself with the History or Discovery channels. In addition, he also keeps to date with “who’s who” or “what’s hot” by reading Ebony, The Source, and Jet magazines.

The Teacher-Researcher

This study grew out of an inherent interest in the area of teaching and learning literature, particularly poetry, in the ESL context. I was particularly interested to explore how I can negotiate with my students to make learning poetry more relevant and connected to their world. This interest stems from my reading of reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) and the abundant literature which expounded on various paths to produce life-long readers of poetry who are confident about the motives and purposes of the art of language.

I have been in *SMK Aman Stesyen* since 1st of June 2001. I started my teaching career in 1988 at a rural school in *Negeri Sembilan*. After completing my degree in 2000, I was posted to *SMK Dato’ Haji Samad*, Port Dickson. As a teacher-researcher I was responsible for preparing materials for the teaching of poetry in the English Language class and also training the students to participate in the activities.

As I have been involved in the teaching of literature for almost half of my teaching career, this research draws upon the experience that I have gained as an English Language teacher for the past sixteen years. My experience has therefore encompassed a wide range of situations, contexts and circumstances in the teaching of poetry to various ethnic groups in both rural and urban environments. As a teacher, I have also been through the different phases in the

development of the literature component in the language curriculum, from earlier years till the present time. It should be noted that this experience comes in handy in a research of this nature – where reasoning, inferencing and interpreting student responses is vital.

My passion for teaching literature spans as far back as my school days where I used to be fascinated by my Literature teachers. Since then I had wanted to be a literature teacher myself. I still remember how wide-eyed we would be as we listened intently and took part in class activities enthusiastically. I hear many teachers lament, among other things, “ my struggling readers only want the facts in literary texts”, “my students become so dreamy the moment I start talking about poetry”, and some even said that “they get very unruly during the literature period”, at several literature workshops and seminars I attended. Often, as teachers, we are prone to leave these students alone, almost helplessly trying to entice them to read further a field. Frustration at the lack of change in their reading habits often results in a mutual negative non-learning truce.

Thus I took it up as a challenge to tap into my students’ interests and experiment with various techniques to keep them actively involved in poetry.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection in this is qualitative study included teacher-researcher field notes, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. To ensure triangulation within the process and to increase the rigour of the data collection procedures (Neuman, 1997), I used multiple data gathering procedures documenting conversations held with students, observations of specific

behaviour and information from written sources. The data collection procedures used in the research will be described in this section.

Participant Observations

Participant observation was carried out throughout the six weeks of the study, when I taught a series of poetry-based lessons in my English Language classes. Throughout, my observer activities were known to my student participants (Merriam, 1998).

I took on different roles at different occasions in the research “examining a phenomenon or behaviour while it is going on” (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p. 162). I observed and listened attentively to their discussions as well as audio-recording throughout the teaching sessions. At other times, I was an active participant sharing insights and views with students in their talk about poems. Yet, at certain points I scaffolded the talk by asking students questions to get them to reflect as they discussed issues depicted in the poems. In less formal environments, I chatted with informants and students and listened to their stories. In all my observations, I recorded verbal as well as nonverbal communication which I felt were significant.

For the purpose of the study, the preparation and presentation of three techniques in teaching poetry were observed. Observations were recorded in field notes for each session. The observations focused on the key participants and also encompassed the whole class. This technique was useful in providing additional information about teaching of poetry to reluctant learners.

Fieldnotes

As a teacher-researcher, I maintained a journal where I recorded jottings, fieldnotes and personal reflections on the happenings in the classroom and the talk that took place in the discussions. I took note of student interest, level of participation, words and actions which I felt were important. I revisited these journal entries as the research proceeded and added in further reflections.

Interviews

I carried out three informal semi-structured interviews during the course of the study. The first interview was conducted before the research proper to obtain personal information relating to the informants' families, background, past literacy practices and their views on the learning of literature, particularly poetry. In the second interview held after a questionnaire was given, I sought further clarifications concerning some comments students wrote pertaining to their perceptions on the teaching and learning of poetry. The final interview was carried out individually with several students at the end of the research to seek their perceptions regarding the teaching of poetry. These interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The data were used to check and supplement other data sources to strengthen claims made. As I carried out interviews with students and teachers, the next section will explain in detail the procedures I followed in conducting these interviews.

Student-interview.

The respondents for the interviews were divided into two categories. One group which was made up of students who were generally not so

enthusiastic about poetry but who were fairly proficient in the English Language, and the other group was made up of students who were weak in the language and who rejected poetry altogether.

The questions posed were basically related to reasons for their lack of interest and how they plan to overcome this problem with poetry being a compulsory component in the English language exams. Students were free to respond either in English or Malay because the objective was to elicit information relevant to the objectives of this study.

The purpose behind the interview questions for students was two-fold. First, to allow freedom for students to express themselves in an informal environment and second, to get a more reliable response from students who might not have responded to questions in the questionnaire appropriately due to obvious reasons.

The interview was conducted in groups of four in a closed air-conditioned room so that they are comfortable, stress-free and are able to respond honestly with ease. The questions asked are listed in Appendix B. The opening questions of the interview served both as a form of introduction and also as a way to determine the personal background of each respondent. Respondents were asked to describe their experience with poetry, how they felt about learning poetry and their preferences of genres.

The interviews lasted from approximately half an hour to nearly one hour with the average running for a little over 30 minutes. A total of 10 groups were interviewed in a one week span.

The researcher made audio recordings of all the interviews. Interview analysis consisted of listening to the tapes, extracting commonly-recurring complaints and problems and transcribing them into identified problem areas.

The data collected from this table was analysed, discussed and recommendations were made to overcome or at the least to minimise weaknesses on the part of the teachers, teaching methods, materials as well as the syllabus content.

Teacher-interview

Three teachers teaching literature volunteered to be interviewed to tell their side of the story. Of the three only one was a trained literature teacher while the other two had attended a three-day training course in the teaching of literature, which they do not remember when. Among the questions asked were basically related to their interest, problems faced in the teaching of poetry and how they handled each problem, and whether poetry has helped in language enrichment or in the personal development of their students.

This interview with teachers was carried out on an informal basis to identify problem areas related to the instructors, the approaches used and the curriculum vis-à-vis the suitability of syllabus content.

On the whole, the structured interviews that were carried out in the study were largely guided by questions and issues to be explored but the exact

wording is not necessarily used. This allowed the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging view of the respondent and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 1998). A majority of the interview sessions were conducted in English. However, some questions were asked in Bahasa Malaysia especially when students failed to understand the question in English. All the students were allowed to respond in Malay or English to gain further insight into their perception. This also helped the researcher to create a casual atmosphere for the students as the researcher was more interested in establishing a dialogue with the respondents.

The Questionnaire

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) was given on 10th of October 2004 to seek information pertaining to student perceptions, preferences and inclination towards poetry. The questionnaire was designed to also get feedback on previous poetry instruction that the students have undergone. This would give a platform to dwell further in pursuit of a better way to deal with the problem at hand.

To enhance participant compliancy, the questionnaire was formulated with as few open-ended questions as possible. Students were instructed to answer questions in the order presented. This was important because “reading ahead” could potentially result in participants uncovering answers to some of the initial open-ended questions, thereby creating false-positive data interpretation.

Data Analysis

An ongoing analysis of data was carried out as the study proceeded. The data from the field-notes, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were read, re-read and broadly coded into key categories. Thus, I made use of four elemental activities to make up the data analysis. These are naming, grouping, finding relationships and displaying (Freeman, 1998). First, I gave names or codes to the data collected. Next, I grouped the data into categories, then I attempted to find relationships among groups or categories of the data through percentile and frequency counts. The data was written up according to the key emerging themes in response to the research questions.

This chapter has described the research approach, setting, participants together with the key informants and teacher-researcher, the data collection and analysis procedures of my research. The next chapter contains discussions of findings driven by the three research questions articulated in Chapter One.