CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Words, either spoken or written can make us laugh, cry, go to war or even fall in love. The accuracy of saying exactly what we mean depends largely on our choice of words. Words, which make up a language, constitute its vocabulary. According to McCarthy, Rasool and Banks (1993), the English language is one of the richest languages, with a large vocabulary of over 1,000,000 words. Therefore it is obvious that an important part of learning a language would be learning its vocabulary.

This study aims to investigate what goes on in the practice of teaching and the beliefs held by teachers teaching English in relation to the teaching of vocabulary during reading comprehension lessons to Form Five students. In this chapter an attempt will be made to provide a background to the study to discuss the purpose of the study and the research questions stated. Additionally, the operationalization of some terms that are of importance to the study will be made and finally the significance of this study will be presented.

1.1 Background to the Study

Pursuant to Malaysia’s independence in 1957, the Malay language or “Bahasa Melayu”, as it is known, has and continually is gradually become the dominant language in most sectors
especially in the government, legal and educational sectors. Nonetheless, English is still regarded as an international language and is extensively used in the many facets of the Malaysian trade, communication and commercial sectors.

English language is taught as a second language in most Malaysian schools. It is believed that a proficiency of English will be beneficial in helping students communicate both within and outside the community where they reside (Littlewood, 1984). Dexterity in the English language is important for academic advancement as well as occupational and professional mobility. As such, students’ adeptness in English is important to From Five students who upon completion of this level of education will proceed to either tertiary level education or enter the job market. It is stated in the Form Five English Language Syllabus for Secondary schools that;

The English Language Programme for the upper secondary school level aims at building and extending upon the proficiency of the students from the lower secondary school level so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and certain job situations; and also to provide points of take-off for various post secondary school needs (The Form Five English Language Syllabus p. 1)

Developing a proficient vocabulary is essential if these students are going to be effective users of English. In the school context, reading comprehension is an important skill for academic success. This study, therefore, focuses on the vocabulary development among secondary school students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) within the context of the teaching and learning of reading.

“Vocabulary”, is defined as, “either the total number of words in a language, or the total number of words a person knows”. These two definitions raise an immediate problem for the language teacher. Obviously, it would be an unrealistic and perhaps impossible goal for language
teachers to attempt to teach all the words in a language. Language teachers therefore have to concentrate on the second definition: 'the words that a person knows' or comprehends which Smith (1978), calls "word/meaning identification" (p. 8). It is this knowledge of "word meaning" that strongly relates to the performance in a learner's reading comprehension and with their overall academic success (Watts, 1995). Knowledge of "word meaning" not only allows learners to communicate effectively in society but also helps them shape their thinking and organize their experiences.

Therefore, for this reason ESL learners must continually strive to develop and improve their vocabulary skills. A bigger vocabulary size is equated with better reading comprehension skills and understanding of text. Studies have shown that the difference in size between a native speaker's vocabulary and a second language learner's vocabulary can be quite vast, usually several thousand words (Nation, 1990). Since second language learners do not have the vocabulary size of a native speaker, vocabulary development is vital for ESL students, especially for successful reading comprehension skills.

In Malaysia, as mentioned earlier, English is taught in government aided schools as a second language. Therefore Malaysian teachers have a daunting task at hand when teaching English in schools so that their students will become sufficient users of the language. In teaching their ESL students, they have to ensure that students acquire a mastery of all aspects of the language, including vocabulary. Vocabulary is important for effective reading comprehension. Further, an analysis of the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) marking scheme indicates that vocabulary plays an important role in the allocation of marks, but is an area that receives less emphasis in class when compared to other areas such as grammar, for example.
According to the SPM marking scheme, a grade A essay is an essay which displays a wide use of vocabulary, used with precision. A grade B is one that displays a wide enough vocabulary use to show intended shades of meaning with some precision. A grade E however, is awarded when a utilises displays limited or simple vocabulary or is too ambitious with the vocabulary use that becomes imperfect and incomprehensible. Vocabulary, hence, plays an important role in the secondary school ESL curriculum.

My observations made as a teacher of the English language in a secondary school suggest that very often teachers of English do not emphasize vocabulary development as teachers are aware that marks will not be deducted if students do not include a wide range of vocabulary in their written answers. Such decisions regarding what aspects of language to focus on during lessons are made by individual teachers. Underlying the practice of teaching, it would seem, are a teacher’s beliefs. Teachers’ beliefs, or what teachers think and the individual way they interpretate their classroom is crucial in determining to a large extent, the teaching and learning practices in the classrooms. This study has been designed to investigate teachers’ beliefs and practices in the teaching of vocabulary in the area of reading comprehension in Form Five ESL classes as teachers' beliefs represent a pertinent source of influence on teachers' ways of thinking, understanding and acting in a classroom. For example, a teacher may believe that learning mathematics is a function of “drilling” the multiplication tables to students. This teacher will most probably use “drill tables” as a part of his/her teaching in class (Pajares, 1992).

Teachers’ belief systems are founded on the goals, values and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching that involves cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. For the purpose of this study, two teachers with a vast difference in the terms of professional teaching experience have been selected as key informants in order to explore and
compare their individual belief systems in relation to their teaching and learning of vocabulary in Form Five ESL reading lessons.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study examined teachers’ beliefs in relation to the way in which the teaching and the learning of vocabulary is carried out in two reading comprehension classrooms. For the purpose of this study two Form Five classes will be observed and two teachers will be interviewed with the aim to explore their beliefs and practices with particular reference to vocabulary development in the context of reading comprehension lessons.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study.

a. What are teachers’ beliefs regarding the importance of vocabulary in a reading comprehension lesson?

b. How do teachers teach vocabulary in reading comprehension lessons?

c. To what extent are teachers’ beliefs about vocabulary learning and teaching congruent with their classroom instructional practices?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is that it attempts to yield an insight into an important area in ESL teaching and learning, also the importance of teachers’ beliefs in shaping the practice of teaching. Until the present time, research on teachers’ belief share three basic assumptions. Firstly, teacher’s beliefs influence both perception and judgment which, in turn, affects what the
teachers say and do in classrooms. Secondly, teachers' beliefs play a critical role in how teachers learn to teach and how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and how that information is translated into classroom practices. Thirdly, understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs (Johnson, 1994).

While past research has highlighted the fact that the practice of teaching is shaped largely by the beliefs of the teacher, nevertheless such studies in terms of the Malaysian ESL context are few. It is therefore necessary to investigate if such findings hold true for the Malaysian context. This investigation is pivotal, as the common belief amongst teachers is that it is the national curriculum that determines the practice of teaching in schools rather than the individual teacher's beliefs. The findings will therefore, have implications for understanding the issues of teacher empowerment in ESL teaching and learning of the English language in Malaysia. It should postulate if teachers' beliefs are indeed very powerful in shaping the teaching and learning processes in the English language classroom.

If teachers are to change their practices then we need to first understand how these practices are determined by their beliefs. An investigation focusing on the teaching of vocabulary in relation to reading comprehension lessons may allow some insights as to what are teachers beliefs with regards to vocabulary development. This information may also serve, as a guide in teacher preparation and in-service programmes as it will shed further light provide insights into an important aspect of teacher cognition in relation to classroom practices. The findings of the study may also be useful to programme and curriculum planners in developing materials and strategies for vocabulary development.
1.5 Definition of Terms

1.5.1 Teachers' Beliefs in this study is interpreted as the individual way in which the teachers show their understanding of the classroom and of their students; the nature of the teaching and learning in the context of reading; their role in a reading class and the role of their students; beliefs that effectively shapes their teaching behaviors to promote second language learning. It is part of the teachers' thought processes and are therefore unobservable.

1.5.2 Teachers' Practices centers on teachers' actions and their observable behavior, including all instructional behavior which is related to the teaching and learning of vocabulary in a reading comprehension lesson.

1.5.3 Vocabulary Teaching in this study includes methods for teaching vocabulary. Watts (1995), categorizes them as five broad vocabulary teaching strategies. They are as follows: definitional, contextual, organizational, mnemonic, structural strategies.

1.5.4 English as a Second Language in this study reflects a situation in which English is not the mother tongue of the speakers but is still considered important and used regularly, especially for communication purposes and in business transactions.

1.5.5 The classroom, as the term applied in this particular research, is defined as 'the gathering, for a given period of time of two or more persons (one of whom generally assumes the role of instructor), for the purpose of language learning' (Van Lier, 1988, cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1994).