CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the research

The use of new approaches and methods in the teaching of the English Language in the ESL classroom have to some extent, not only altered but also challenged the traditional approaches in the language classroom. Although these developments signify new directions in language teaching, the focus seems to move towards the end product and often overlooks the process - especially the difficulties that these ESL learners face in the classroom. This research examines, in several ways, the nature and extent of these difficulties faced by the learners and to put them into perspective, the focus being on: learner difficulties in group work. This study is delimited to the Malaysian classroom learning and to meet this aim, a corpus of data would be collected and analyses of classroom interactions would be carried out through which learner difficulties in group work would be identified and classified. It argues for the need to re-examine some teaching methods in these classes that have proven to be a problem and hindrance in language learning for the learner and also recommends ways to alleviate these difficulties.

When ELT (English Language Training) in Malaysia made the transition from traditional, teacher-directed, skills-separate circular model to a more learner-directed, content-based, and integrated skills model (the KBSM Syllabus),
teachers found that students required explicit guidance to perform effectively within the new model. The KBSM (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah) Syllabus was designed for the English Language subject in secondary schools. The KBSM Syllabus is aimed at building and extending upon the proficiency of the students so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English for communication purposes. Thus, there is a need for an awareness of how teacher and learner roles in a more learner-directed model differed from those in a more teacher-directed model. Differences between educational systems and a consideration of educational values and beliefs require discussion and reflection on the part of both teachers and students. Thus, teachers have developed a variety of ways to help students become more mentally prepared for learning as students needed to move beyond recall of literal level knowledge to more active, applied learning. Critical thinking and problem solving-tasks and activities were therefore, developed by teachers, which required students to demonstrate their abilities to apply and extend knowledge gained. However, whilst the students are going through these changes in their learning styles and management, they encounter many learning difficulties, partly due to the new curriculum and teaching methodologies, but mostly due to their abilities in language acquisition and inhibitions in using the English Language and, their difficulties in carrying out tasks that require them to work in groups using the cooperative and collaborative way.
This thesis thus examines learner difficulties in group work in the second language classroom. This study is primarily based on materials gathered from a Form Four English class at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kelana Jaya, Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

There are reasons why this study is focused on the form four students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kelana Jaya. Firstly, the researcher has easy access to this group of learners as she is a staff member of this school. Secondly, the researcher has an interest not just in group work difficulties, but also a general interest in the teaching of English Language, with particular focus on interactive skills. Thus, the researcher feels that it is helpful to conceptualize and measure the effectiveness of group work activities right at the outset and the students of this school are easily accessible to the researcher for this purpose. The assumption that objectives of the lessons have been met if students are attentive and receptive during these activities should be further looked into. Learner attentiveness and receptivity do not reveal the inner frustrations that these learners face in the language class. It is hoped that this study can be helpful for both teachers and learners to reflect on learning difficulties in the language classroom, with emphasis on group work, as well as providing an opening for teachers to understand the structure of the classroom.
1.1 Background of the study

The English Language Programme for the upper secondary school level (Forms Three to Five) aims at building and extending upon the proficiency of the students from the lower school level (Forms One and Two) so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English needed to communicate in everyday activities and certain job situations; and also to provide points of take-off for various post-secondary school needs, such as deciding on a suitable course for higher education. The English Language Programme also emphasizes the teaching of both oracy (listening and speaking) and literacy (reading and writing) skills. However, Malachi Edwin (1993:44-49), who carried out a detailed background and research work in Malaysian schools, has found that the proficiency level of the English language among Malaysian students is low. Therefore, policy makers have been seeking ways and methods to upgrade the language proficiency levels of the students. The English Language Programme that has been designed, that is the KBSM Syllabus, also aims at providing opportunities for self-expression and creativity as well as the development of aesthetics for the learner. Teachers are also required to infuse literary elements into the language programme besides observing the principle of integration of language skills, language contents and moral values. Teachers therefore, face the challenge of creating a suitable learning environment for the Malaysian ESL learner, taking into consideration, the learner’s language problems and difficulties when preparing the language lesson.
According to Swan and Walter (1994), learners can easily become confused in the complicated landscape of study. A language class, therefore, must supply some kind of "map" of language learning so that learners can understand the purpose of activities and see how the various lessons add up to a coherent whole. However, learners sometimes resist important and useful activities that do not fit with their preconceptions, and this can hinder progress. Problems are also especially likely to arise over exercises and activities involving group work. Teachers therefore may have to spend time training students in adopting new attitudes to language learning and to respond to methods which they "distrust", such as, different learning strategies which they are not accustomed to. These strategies may include skills that require the learners to be more autonomous in their language production and to be less dependent on the teacher.

It is with this awareness that this research is embarked upon. The research will be based on a study of learner difficulties in group work while carrying out language tasks and activities. Group work is advocated in this research as it is argued that effective group work in the language class respects students' thinking and it values independence of learning and is rooted high in expectations in students' achievement (Rudduck, 1976).

In carrying out this study, the researcher will also explore the role of the teacher in the teaching and learning process of group work tasks and activities in
the classroom, as the many different and complex roles of both teachers and learners are essential and contributory to this research.

1.2 Objectives of the study

This study sets out to identify learner difficulties in carrying out group work. The researcher argues that these difficulties are often overlooked in practice and only when they are identified and addressed can new methods and approaches in language teaching be explored and experimented with.

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. identify learner difficulties in handling group work in the classroom
2. define the nature of these difficulties
3. examine the causes and effects of these difficulties
4. put forward a set of recommendations that could help tackle the problems or provide some understanding of the difficulties that learners go through in the classroom with regard to group work.

This set of objectives provides a framework for this study and by achieving these objectives, a clearer picture of the difficulties of the learners can be established. Identifying and defining these difficulties can link many other variables not directly obvious to the causes of these difficulties. It is also hoped that the findings can provide useful insights into the teaching and learning of language in general.
1.3 Rationale of the study

A major concern of this study is to examine the difficulties that learners face while carrying out group work in the language class. According to Cahn (1975), the trouble with many learning environments is that the social climate is not sufficiently developed for students to voice what they understand or do not understand. The admission of what a student knows or does not know carry with it a price of embarrassment or shame, and anxiety. Thus, the student's immediate learning situation is only known to the student himself and is hidden to the teacher or his peers. This study is aimed at looking at the areas of learning difficulties faced by these learners, specifically in the scope of group work in the language class. It is hoped that identification of learners' difficulties will help teachers to approach learners' problems in learning and acquiring the language with a better understanding of the learning situation and environment, and to be more emphatic and sensitive to the needs of the learners.

1.4 Scope of the study

To properly pursue the objectives defined above, teaching practices in general as well as certain approaches and methods of language teaching need to be examined. The discussion of these issues is discussed in Chapter Two. Chapter Three takes into account the research methodology which includes the suitability of a case study approach, some background information about the samples used for the study and the instruments used in data collection. Chapter Three also discusses the approach of a basic statistical analysis on the questionnaires.
Interviews were quantified and brought in to support the main findings. Video tapings on classroom observations would also be used to support research findings. Chapter Four discusses the data analysis and results of the findings. Chapter Five concludes with a set of recommendations that could help to alleviate difficulties that learners face in their group activities and provide a stepping-stone for a greater understanding of language teaching.

1.5 Significance of the study

Since group work activities, which incorporate the cooperative and collaborative techniques in learning, are not as popular as yet in the Malaysian secondary school context, due to factors such as time constraint and teachers trying to complete the syllabus before examinations, this study aims to contribute positively to this end. Research on teaching suggests that the notion of activity is central to an understanding of teaching. It influences how teachers conceptualize teaching and how lessons are organized. Teachers may adapt or create teaching materials so as to provide opportunities for learners to be actively engaged in real communication or the materials can also be designed to incorporate practice in any language skills (Long and Richards, 1987). Classroom instruction should incorporate features that would allow opportunities for learners to be exposed to and to use real communication; activities should be meaningful to learners and which will also motivate them to sustain communication to accomplish specific goals.
According to Johnson and Johnson (1975:215) cited by Savova and Donato (1991), learners should realize that in order for the activity to be successful, each and everyone in the group will need each other's cooperation and contribution. Hence, if there is no constructive interaction among members of the group, this will defeat the whole purpose of group work. Group work is then seen as a session where the weaker students are able to get help from the better students and, it is also seen as an activity where each student depends on the other. Group work can be seen as successful when every member of the group cooperates and collaborates. It defeats the purpose if members do not interact because group work means that members are supposed to benefit by sharing and contributing their views and opinions. This study becomes necessary as learners will work in groups, and the main focus will not only be on how successful learners are in accomplishing their tasks, but also on the language experience and confidence they gain or achieve while carrying out the tasks; and how their difficulties in group work can be identified and hopefully, resolved.

1.6 Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What do teachers contribute to group work activities?

2. What are the difficulties that learners face in carrying out group work in the language class?

3. What is learner’s attitude toward group work as a language learning resource?

4. What are ESL teacher’s views on the appropriacy of group work activities?