

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study looks at the reading problems encountered by the English option trainee teachers at Maktab Perguruan Batu Pahat (MPBP). The trainee teachers face problems in accessing academic texts that are written in English. Considering the importance given to the English language at the national and the international level, it is necessary for our future English teachers to be proficient in the English language. This is especially so for the trainee teachers who are going to be the future educators. Furthermore, there is so much new and important information published in English that requires to be retrieved. This would mean that a deficiency in reading skills or a lack of proficiency in reading in English would lead to a great disadvantage as all this new information would go unread.

The trainees need to develop more efficient and effective reading skills in order to comprehend English texts and at a faster rate too. This is because we live in the age of information overload. One cannot seem to read fast enough to keep pace with the great amount of available information. In the past thirty years, mankind has churned out more words than in the previous five centuries (Lee, 1997). Therefore, if the trainee teachers do not improve their reading skills in the English language, they are going to be left behind and this will have serious repercussions when they are posted to schools. Thus, the English language and its

reading aspect is a major concern of many. It can be concluded that reading competence among trainee teachers is of utmost importance.

1.2 BACKGROUND

1.2.1 The Importance of English in Malaysia Today

In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling. This is stated in the primary school syllabus known in Bahasa Melayu as 'Sukatan Pelajaran Sekolah Rendah' (1995). In this syllabus it is also stated that English is a means of communication in certain everyday activities and certain job situations. A good knowledge of the English language is essential if Malaysians want to engage meaningfully in local and international trade. In addition, the emergence of information technology and the computer age has made it necessary for Malaysians to possess a good command of English. The English language also provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational materials. It is necessary to acknowledge the status of English as a language that has gained a strong standing in the world today. Thus, Malaysians would have to acknowledge the importance of the English language and be proficient in it.

According to McArthur (1992:640), in Malaysia, ever since English was relegated to the status of second language in the 1970's, there has been a serious reduction in its usage. Now it is only taught as a subject in school making up three

hours per week of the school curriculum. English is only tested at public examinations and it is not compulsory to gain a pass in it. As a result, there has been a general deterioration in standards of English. Asmah Hj. Omar (1983:229) also noted this deterioration of the English language and attributed it to the change in the medium of education from English to Malay in 1983. This deterioration is obvious amongst those who enter Teacher Training Colleges as well, since, they are the product of the education system where English is not the medium of education.

The government too had taken steps to help improve English proficiency. The Malaysian Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced that a new English paper, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), will be made compulsory to pre-university and Form Six students. This step is an attempt to raise the English proficiency levels of those concerned (NST 22/12/98:1). This, he added, will take effect from the year 2000. This move it is hoped will get the pre-university and the Form Six students to take English seriously and work harder at improving their proficiency. Thus, there is a necessity to acknowledge the importance of English as it is relevant to meet the current educational needs in the country and the world.

1.2.2 The Trainee Teachers

This study involves the semester two trainee teachers at the Diploma level.

These teachers will graduate with a Diploma in Education or in Bahasa Melayu, Diploma Pendidikan Malaysia (DPM) after 3 years (6 semesters) of lectures and practical training. On the whole, the trainees selected for the English Option have a very low proficiency in English as reflected in the Prognostic test which is administered upon their entry into the college. The selection of these trainees is done after an interview conducted by officials from the Teacher Education Section or in Bahasa Melayu, Bahagian Pendidikan Guru (BPG). This selection is based solely on the trainees having obtained a credit for their English at the Form Five or in Bahasa Melayu, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) level. The researcher had observed that proficiency in reading and effective communication in English is not considered when selecting candidates. Since the selected trainee teachers will be leaving college as teachers of English, it is important for them to possess a high proficiency of English by the time they graduate. They must themselves achieve an acceptable level of proficiency in reading and comprehension of materials written in the English language in order to be able to teach English to the children in the primary schools. Otherwise, the English proficiency of our future English language teachers and their students will be highly questionable.

1.2.3 The Importance of Reading in the English Language

The researcher chose to do a study on the reading aspect because it was viewed that, of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, reading

needed to be given the most attention. This is a view many linguists seem to share.

Among the four language skills - writing, speaking, listening and reading - the last is often regarded by many as the most important.

Anderson, (1999)

Anderson (1999) added that the more exposure to language a student had through reading , the greater the possibility that overall proficiency will increase. The researcher had observed that this is true based on past experience.

Moreover, it is essential to be proficient in English as it is a dominant language of printed information. Therefore, to gain access to knowledge, be it general or specialized, Malaysians have to be competent readers. There is so much technical and scientific literature published in English that the ability to read and comprehend what one is reading is an essential prerequisite in any field of academic study. Effective reading in English is necessary for professional needs too. According to Carrell (1988:1), reading is by far the most important of the four skills. Reading in English is especially necessary at present with the advent of computer technology where loads of information is accessible through the internet where English is the predominant language used. It is necessary for teachers, especially, to be able to access the available information in order to gain knowledge to teach the children in schools effectively. Teachers have to teach the children how to access the available information and comprehend it.

1.2.4 Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension

Two major factors that will be looked into here are the reader factor and the text related factor.

1.2.4.1 Reader factor

Recent research has shown that a learner's prior knowledge and background experience of a topic plays a crucial role in facilitating future comprehension (Lee King Siong 1994:25). The reader needs to have sufficient background knowledge that must be activated before it can be accessed. The reader's word knowledge, linguistic competence, cognitive style and use of metacognitive strategies have also been found to significantly affect reading comprehension. Anderson et al (1977:369) sums up the importance of prior knowledge as: 'Every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well'.

1.2.4.2 Text factor

Two issues concerning text factor that need to be taken into account are text considerateness and readability. Text considerateness involves features such as organization and structure, clarity and coherence, accuracy and consistency of information, whether one concept or many concepts are addressed at a time and whether the text is appropriate for the students and the purpose. Lee (1994) has cited Rothkopf (1982) who said that a text must contain the information that the

reader needs, and it would be helpful if the text is well organized and well-written.

The concept of readability on the other hand deals with the ease with which a person can read printed material. This can be viewed from two aspects i.e. the text-centred aspect and the learner-centred aspect. The text-centred aspect involves features such as sentence length and frequency of long or multisyllabic words and so on. The learner-centred aspect involves the reader's view, that is, factors including attitude and motivation.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The trainee teachers in college find it extremely difficult to switch from an all-Malay medium in school to an all-English medium of instruction in the teacher training college. This would be due to the fact that trainees had done all their schooling, that is about eleven years, in the Malay medium.

Theoretically, in Malaysia, students who have completed their secondary school education should be able to communicate reasonably well in English. This is highlighted by Asmah Hj. Omar (1983:230) who emphasised that the status of second language required that 'English be taught effectively at the school, in such a way that the Malaysians who had undergone the national education system will have an overall proficiency in English which will enable them to communicate in the language'. However, through the researcher's experience it was found that this is not the case in reality. It was observed that many of the trainees upon entry into

college have problems in comprehending what they read and communicating effectively in English. These trainees can hardly make a single complete sentence orally, or otherwise, without any grammatical errors. The researcher noted that they find it difficult to handle the English reading assignments that are required of them. One of the reasons for this could be the limited exposure to English in school (only 180 minutes per week in school). Thus, when they register for the DPM English option course they are at a general disadvantage.

The researcher's own experience in teaching English at MPBP had prompted the undertaking of this study. It had been observed that the trainee teachers do not seem to read enough and very little of what is read is comprehended by the trainees. When asked to read, the English option trainees find it difficult to comprehend many terms. They are unfamiliar with the terms in the academic materials and do not make any obvious attempt to look-up their meanings in a dictionary or other sources. As such, they are incapable of completing their assignments satisfactorily. Many of these trainees find it a problem to complete even a single sentence in English and communicate the meaning from a given text as they are unable to interpret the text that was read.

All these pose a serious problem because these trainees have to read and comprehend materials in English. The DPM course for the English option trainee teachers requires that the medium of education be in English in order for them to graduate as teachers of English.

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

- highlight the socioeconomic and academic status of the trainee teacher,
- determine the English usage and the attitude of the trainee teacher towards the English language,
- investigate the reading strategies employed by the trainee teacher,
- ascertain the problems faced by the trainee teacher in reading in English.
- view the English lecturers' perceptions regarding the importance of reading in general and the reading proficiency levels of the trainees specifically.
- elicit suggestions from the English unit lecturers on ways to improve the English teacher training programme.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This is a quantitative study and attempts to answer the following research questions :-

1. Does the socioeconomic and academic status of the trainee teachers contribute to their reading problems?
2. Does the attitude of the trainees regarding the English language and the English course contribute to their reading problems?
3. Does the level of English language proficiency among the teacher

trainees contribute to their reading problems?

4. What are the reading strategies employed by the trainee teachers?
5. What do the trainees perceive as factors contributing to their problems in the reading of English materials?
6. What are the views of the English unit lecturers regarding the importance of reading and the actual reading proficiency of the English option trainee teachers under study?
7. What do the English Unit lecturers perceive as factors contributing to problems in reading English materials?
8. What are the suggestions of the English unit lecturers to improve the English teacher training programme?

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is hoped that the results of this study will throw some light on the actual problems faced by the trainees in reading and comprehending the materials in English that they are exposed to. It will also enable lecturers to review their present teaching techniques and classroom practices and highlight areas of strengths as well as areas of weaknesses in the reading component of the current programme with a view to addressing these problems.

The results from the findings of this study would provide some insight to other lecturers into ways and means of tackling problems of a similar nature.

The findings of this study can help to highlight the attitudes the trainee teachers presently have towards reading English materials and the English course in general. Looking into the factors contributing to the trainees' reading problems, this study will help to relate the importance of positive attitudes to the achievement of success.

This study will help in viewing how reading problems can be better tackled by the trainees themselves.

In addition, this study will attempt to determine the relationship between the reading strategies adopted by the trainees and their reading comprehension problems. This could be used to assist in finding solutions to the reading problems

Finally, it is hoped that the findings of this study will provide some guidance in the selection and screening of those who opt to be English teachers. As such it will be of importance to the selection committee from the Teacher Training Division of the Education Ministry in determining more suitable candidates as English option teacher trainees.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has its various limitations. Firstly, data collection for the trainees was done using the questionnaire only. More information would have been available by conducting interviews too. However, interviewing the trainees was not possible due to time constraint.

Categorizing all the reading problems posed a real problem. Due to the wide scope of reading problems, it was difficult to categorise them for the purpose of using the questionnaire. This also resulted in the inability to group all the possible problems related to the area of reading and comprehension. Using the questionnaire thus limited the scope to a certain extent.

Also due to the wide scope that had been dealt with in this study such as, vocabulary problems, reading problems and strategies, English usage problems, attitude problems and text related problems, it was not possible to study all the areas in great detail. If one or two of the issues had been focussed upon, it would have been possible for a more thorough study. However, this was not done as the researcher wanted to have a general view of the reading related problems faced by the respondents in this study. A detailed study of the individual issues would have required more time and the researcher felt that individual issues could be dealt with in some other study.

Other limitations were to do with the research methodology. The methodology adopted was based on instruments such as the questionnaire and the structured interview. This research was more quantitative in nature rather than

qualitative. For adequate and more illuminating findings, a range of information is required from the respondents. The quantitative nature of this research has not enabled access to important individual differences and individual factors. The grouping of data 'through the questionnaire, reduces the effects of individual differences in favour of similarities across individuals' (Alderson and Urquhart, 1992).

There was a time constraint regarding the filling in of the questionnaire. The trainees in college were fully occupied with their activities in college. They had a lot of coursework and assignments. Their lecture hours were from eight in the morning till four-thirty in the evening followed by co-curriculum activities from five till six-thirty in the evening. It was difficult to find a free slot for them to fill the questionnaire.

Finally, the findings of this study will be applicable to this group of trainees of MBPB only and, hence, the results or findings cannot be extended to trainees of other colleges.