

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter reviews literature in four main aspects to provide the conceptual framework for this research. The researcher has decided upon these four aspects as they cover all the areas touched upon in this study. In the first section of this chapter the researcher discusses the importance of English. This is followed by a brief account of some attitude studies. The third section reviews literature on reading and reading related issues such as reading problems and reading strategies, views on reading of ESL such as bottom-up and top-down processing, the reader and the text, teaching reading, the schema theory and background knowledge.

Finally, the researcher has highlighted some related factors which influence reading comprehension and abilities such as socioeconomic status (SES) and academic background.

#### **2.2 Importance of English at the national and international level**

English is an international language and it is important to have knowledge of it. It is not only the language necessary for knowledge but it is the language of information technology. Those who do not have knowledge of English are at a

general disadvantage as they will be incapable of being part of the information technology age.

Malaysians have to realize that English has gained a strong footing among the world languages. Asmah Hj. Omar (1979) had said the following regarding the status of English...

“... the status of English as the second most important language as specified by the government does not mean that it is the ‘second language’ as understood by the linguists, but rather it is important enough to be the next language after the national language... to be acquired by Malaysians.”

(Asmah, 1979:26)

Although English had been given the status of second language in Malaysia, its proficiency has been deteriorating in recent years. This has caused major concern. McArthur (1992) had stated that in 1969, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia had decided that all English medium schools become Malay medium schools. He added that by the early 1980's the process through which Bahasa Malaysia has become the national language of education was virtually complete...

"...but the shift prompted widespread concern that general proficiency in English would decline. To prevent this, English has been retained as the compulsory second language in primary and secondary schools. Some 20% of the present population understand English and some 25% of city dwellers use it for some purposes in everyday life. It is widely used in the media and as a reading language in higher education."

(McArthur,T, 1992 :640)

It had been found that the English proficiency attained at school, among Malaysians, is not sufficient to make university students effective readers. They are not able to understand what they read in their own field of study. This deficiency had been confirmed by research projects like UMESPP (University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project, 1975) which was embarked upon by the Language Centre of the University of Malaya with the assistance of Birmingham University, the British Council and the Inter-University Council (London). The purpose of this project was to develop materials for the teaching of English to university students with the main objective being reading comprehension. A reading proficiency test was designed to discover the difference in reading competence between readers from the Malay medium of education and the English medium of education. This test was conducted on a one third sample of all entrants to the University of Malaya in 1975. The mean scores, as shown below, depicted a wide gap between the performance of these readers.

Malay-medium students	-	mean score of 8.95 marks
English-medium students	-	mean score of 22.5 marks
Possible maximum score	-	40.0 marks

(Chitravelu,N, 1975)

Similarly, Cooper (1992:123) highlighted a study in which was reported that readers from the Malay medium of education showed no improvement in reading level based on a set of cloze tests. The passages in these tests were graded according to their vocabulary level, from level A (500 words) to level G (2000

words). This study concluded that long before the students reached the university, their reading comprehension 'had reached a plateau that was inadequate' (Cooper, 1992:123) to cope with university-level texts.

As such, Malaysians have to realise the importance of the English language. There is an obvious focus on the importance of English at both the national level and international level. Gethin (1997:42) had clearly indicated that English is a world language. McArthur, (1996), the founding editor of the 'English Today' journal, during his SAAL (Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics) lecture on the 'Changing Face of English' held in the Regional English Language Centre in Singapore, said that at the end of the twentieth century...

“...English has become the undisputed ‘lingua-franca’ of the entire world ... part of a process widely heralded in the media as ‘globalization’. It has even been said that not to know English today is not to be adequately educated.”

(McArthur,T,1996)

Malaysians who do not know English will most probably be left behind in the race for knowledge in the modern world today. Actually, a number of studies had shown that the standard of English in several parts of the world had declined somewhat recently. Gethin (1997:42), in his study, judged that the standards of English had declined in the last thirty or forty years despite all the new theories, tools and techniques that had been developed. Gethin further added that this view



was also supported by Hedberg and Korlen (1997) through similar studies done in Sweden. It was stated that Sweden was supposed to have a sophisticated society with extremely high educational and academic standards and very concerned not to be cut off from the rest of the world. Gethin (1997:43) said that this was also the case with Japan and that it was probably as important for Japan as for Sweden to master English.

The situation in Malaysia is similar. Lee (1994) said that Malaysians need to acquire English not only for basic communication but for more advanced literary skills such as reading for the acquisition of knowledge. To quote our Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir, cited by Lee (1994:9)...

“...in the information age that we are living the  
Malaysian society must be information rich...”

(Mahathir,M, 1991.Vision 2020)

There has been an obvious emphasis by the government of Malaysia on the necessity to improve English proficiency among Malaysians. This is reflected in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995:170) which said that the decline in the standard of English needed to be nipped and the government may consider introducing English as a compulsory subject to pass in examinations.

As an English lecturer in a teacher training college and having been in the field for the past ten years, the researcher has also observed the decline of the English standards. The average standard of the English language learning is abysmally low among the school going children and the trainee teachers whom the researcher had come into contact with. The results of the prognostic test held

upon entrance into the English Course and the English papers in the semester one and semester two final exams in M.P.B.P depicted clearly the low proficiency levels of the trainee teachers. In the present study, the results of the prognostic test (Chapter 4.2.5.4) and the results of the English paper in the final exams of semester one and two (Chapter 4.2.5.5), indicate that the trainees indeed have very low reading proficiency.

The next section reviews the role of attitude in language learning and reading.

## **2.3 ATTITUDE STUDIES - THE ROLE OF READING ATTITUDE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

### **2.3.1 Importance of attitude**

Identifying and measuring attitudes has been an issue over the years. It was put forward by Vacca and Vacca (1996) that reading attitudes are never easy to identify. However, as there is a lot of concern about readers' strengths and instructional needs in relation to reading content area texts, it would be difficult to ignore their attitudes, interests and self-concepts in the search for success in reading. It was noted that readers' interests and self-concepts are 'interwoven into the fabric of reading attitude'. In other words, what students like to read, that is, their interests, will influence when, why and how often they read.

What part does attitude play in the reader and the language learner? The importance of attitude in learning a language has been debated by a number of

linguists. Gardner and Lambert (1959) are the early scholars who laid the foundation of the theory of second language learning (L2) attitude and motivation. They studied the relationship between attitude, motivation and the achievement of an L2 learner. According to Rubin (1993:55), attitudes exert a 'directive and dynamic influence' over one's behaviour. She added that, generally, teachers desire to make a positive and beneficial difference in the lives of their students and so they want to bring about desirable changes in the learning behaviour of their students.

The importance of attitude in language learning is also supported by Lightbown and Spada (1993:23) who highlighted the 'affective filter hypothesis' introduced by Stephen Krashen. The 'affective filter' is an imaginary barrier which prevents learners from using input which is available in the environment. Attitude comes under one of the factors of 'affect'.

“...affect refers to such things as motives, needs, attitude, and emotional state ... thus, depending on the learner's state of the mind or disposition, the 'filter' limits what is... acquired ... Teachers can understand why some learners, given the opportunity to learn, may be successful while others are not...”

(Lightbown,M and Spada,N, 1993:28)

They said that the overall findings indicated that positive attitude and motivation are related to success in second language learning and 'success leads to success' (Lightbown and Spada 1993:39). The results in another study done by Wen (1997), suggested that when the students' goal is achieving language

proficiency, they may be more likely to tailor their expectations of themselves and their learning process towards achieving that goal. Wen (1997:244) also suggested that when students believe that they are able to make differences in their learning process and outcomes, they actively exert effort in pursuit of their goals.

However, some studies on attitude done in Malaysia have shown that there is a weak relationship between attitude towards English and achievement in learning it. Some such studies were done by Chandrasegaran (1979), Annie bte Attan (1982), Mariam Zamani bte Mohd. Ismail (1983) and Mariappan (1986).

Research on attitudes, on the whole, are based on people's reactions towards the issue at hand which in the case of this study is, the trainee teachers' attitude towards English, the English course and reading in English. Some linguists are of the view that to learn a language it is necessary to have knowledge of the culture associated with that language. What do Malaysians in general think about the culture associated with the native English speakers? Does this contribute to their attitude towards the English language? Safnil (1996:73), in his study, 'How to integrate Cultural Aspects into English Classrooms', said that part of knowing a language is knowing cultural norms in the language. Lippmann (1986:17) put forward his view that language expresses the concepts considered important in that culture. Safnil (1996:76) is of the view that in order to avoid prejudices when teaching a foreign language the similarities and differences between the cultures should be discussed. Safnil had quoted that...

“...to develop a positive attitude of the learners for the target language, similarities should be discussed before talking about the differences ...learning the cultural rules of a foreign language can reduce the level of linguistic and culture shock that one might experience. It can also reduce the level of prejudice of the learners for the target culture, which will result in their positive attitude for the target language and culture, and eventually positively affect their learning motivation.”

(Safnil,1976:76)

So, it can be said that positive attitude towards English most probably will lead to success in achievement of proficiency in the English language.

### **2.3.2 Learning a language not teaching it**

A language cannot be forced upon a person. That individual must want to learn the language. According to Gethin (1997:43), in the past forty years or so a lot of effort had been put into the pedagogical aspect to improve the learning of English and teachers now are supposed to be trained ‘professionals’. However, if improved teaching does not result in better English learning, then, there is something wrong. He added that the end is not teaching, it is learning. Therefore, people must want to learn English. It is of no use if one wants to teach and the learner does not want to learn. Most of all,

“...we need to recognize the essential truth that languages can only be learned; they cannot be taught. Language learners need to realize that they must do virtually everything for themselves...”

(Gethin,A,1997:43)

Thus, the learner must have the right attitude towards learning the English language and reading in English is one safe way of learning the language.

The following section discusses literature on the importance of reading to a language learner.

## **2.4 READING**

### **2.4.1 Importance of reading and the reading habit**

A broad, widely used definition of reading has been given by Rubin (1993) relating reading to the printed page.

Reading is a complex, dynamic process that involves the bringing of meaning to and the getting of meaning from the printed page.

(Rubin,D,1993:5)

This definition implies the interplay of the reader's backgrounds, experiences and their emotions. Everyone is expected to know how to read. Literacy is essential for survival. Rubin stressed that it is a fact that most information is passed through the 'written word', and anyone who has difficulty reading can be considered as being seriously handicapped.

Reading like listening, is a receptive skill which gives the reader input from a text. According to Leu and Kinzer (1987), silent reading is more efficient and also faster than listening when attempting to learn a large amount of information. You can move at your own pace and quickly scan for the required information rather than reading an entire text for a particular item. They added

that reading goes beyond decoding symbols and involves understanding and, thus, it is the process of reading that must be taught. They emphasised that teaching reading may be thought of as teaching thinking. Reading ability, to a large extent, influences one's life style. It was also stressed that one's ability to read is a key factor in determining employment opportunities. In addition, reading can provide answers, provide needed directions, give relief from boredom, can teach and most importantly, it can stimulate original thought. Leu and Kinzer (1987:7) also highlighted that 'teachers and parents as well as students, are concerned that reading be learned and taught properly'. This is because reading cuts across every subject area. If a person cannot read, this would seriously affect the quality and quantity of learning done by that person. Thus, there is an urgent need to stress here on the development of a healthy reading habit.

Lately, there has been mounting concern about the reading habit among Malaysians. In a paper put forward by Devinder and Hunt (1990), it was stated that a number of politicians and academicians had conveyed their dissatisfaction regarding the reading habit among many Malaysians. Devinder had reported that a survey conducted under the chairmanship of Atan bin Long (1984:129) showed that Malaysians spent an average of RM 10.00 or less monthly on books and magazines. This survey also indicated that only 42% of the total 15,054 subjects surveyed admitted to reading books within the previous 6 months of the survey and half of them could not recollect the titles of the books

they had read. As such, the Ministry of Education felt the need to declare 1988 as the 'Reading Year' just to promote reading activities among Malaysians.

#### **2.4.2 Bottom-up and top-down processing of reading**

Earlier views on reading are basically seen from the 'bottom-up' (decoding) view of the reading process. That is to say that readers move from simple, textual units (words) to larger units at the 'top' (sentences). This view emphasises that it is the text itself which gives meaning to it and it is not the reader who gives meaning to the text. According to Harris and Sipay (1990), it is believed that the 'bottom-up' processing is done when the reader first learns to read.

However, a newer, more popular and powerful view of reading in ELT is the so-called 'psycholinguistic model' with a 'top-down' (concept driven) view. This view was supported by Goodman (1967) who said that reading is a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' which is a 'reader-centred' view. In the reading process, the readers sample the text, make hypotheses about what is coming next, sample it to test their hypotheses and make new hypotheses and so forth. Goodman was also of the view that this was done at 'every cognitive level' and so the readers will not have to decode every letter or word. Nuttall (1982) supported this view by explaining that a good reader takes in several words at a time and has the ability to 'chunk a text into sense units, each consisting of several words and each taken in by one fixation of the reader's eyes'. Nuttall added that the larger the



'sense groups' a reader can take in, the more easily he would turn them into coherent messages. The readers reconstruct their text according to the graphic cues they had sampled. This is done with the help of the knowledge of the language and its redundancy rules. This theory, cited by Amos (1996:25), claimed that this is a universal process that had been built through the study of English reading. This 'top-down' view was also supported by other researchers such as Smith (1971) and Bernhardt (1991). Amos added,

“...this view did not remain in the realm of L2 research, but permeated the materials written in the late 1970s and 1980s through which it still exerts a powerful influence. This becomes clear when looking at ELT books on reading and at teacher training courses.”

(Amos,P,1996:26)

The top-down processing depends greatly on the reader's background of experiences and language ability in constructing meaning from the text. Harris and Sipay (1990) had stated that top-down theorists believed that 'the skilled readers move directly from print to meaning without first recording print to speech'.

On the other hand, another view was that of Wallace (1992) who said that to compensate for the lack of well-developed automatized skills, readers need to be presented with tasks where background knowledge, context, and task all work together to help readers achieve their goal. He adds that one of the goals of L2 reading instruction was to make readers less reliant on top-down processing and

help them progress towards greater reliance on bottom-up strategies as they become more prominent.

Stanovich (1991) stressed that the newer models of reading tend to restrict top-down processing. He said that reading is seen as more text-bound and guessing is minimal.

Yet another view on the processing of reading is the view that refers to the interactive model of reading which is somewhat, but not completely, a cross between the top-down and bottom-up processing. In 'interactive' processing, it is believed that top-down processing information is dependent on the bottom-up processing and vice versa. Rubin defined interactive processing as,

"...if the material is difficult to decode, this difficulty will obviously influence comprehension, similarly, if the material is difficult to understand, the impediment will slow down the decoding process."

(Rubin,D,1993:21)

Harris and Sipay (1990) noted that theorists do not completely agree as to which kind of processing initiates the reading process or whether or not they occur simultaneously. They added, however, that theorists do agree that the reading process does involve the 'skillful combination of linguistic and semantic knowledge with visual information in order to reconstruct the meaning intended by the author' (Rubin, 1993:21) through the text.

This leads us to think about the relationship between the reader and text.

### **2.4.3 The reader and the text**

There are various views regarding the reader's relationship to the text that he is reading. There was an early focus on the reader which was brought about by Barthes (1996), cited by Gilroy and Parkinson (1996:215), who announced 'the death of the author and the birth of the reader.' This meant that the reader does not take a passive role. It is the reader who completes the meaning of the text, thus, 'actualising' or 'realising' it. They regard the reader as an 'active agent' in the creation of meaning to the text. Therefore, there was an obvious change in the focus from the text to the reader of the text. Gilroy and Parkinson (1996) also added that there was a focus on the learner with attention on the affective and human factors involved. They talked about the 'reader response theory' saying that it challenges the text-oriented theories and they claim that ...

“...a text has no real existence until it is read...”

(Gilroy,M and Parkinson,B,1996:214.)

Reading is a constructive activity. The reader will construct meaning from the text being read based on the reader's purpose. Literary studies and cognitive psychology have...

“... turned more thoroughgoing attention to the problem of constructing meaning from reading. Literary studies ... have turned from both intentions of the author and the text itself to the reader's construction of meaning from the fixed set of words of a text ... Holland (1968) and Bleich (1978), see the construction of meaning as almost wholly guided by the reader, so much so that the text has little role in determining meaning.”

(Bazerman,C,1985:3-4)

Comprehension, as seen here, is actually a reader's interaction with a text. The background knowledge of the readers is employed to understand a text. This view is supported by Bruce (1981) and Steffensen (1981) cited by Bazerman (1985:4). Bazerman (1985) believed strongly that the reader is 'not an isolated mind, devoid of experience and community'. He also added that many studies show how reading is placed against experience and how shared meanings are constructed. Readers, he stressed, actively use their structured background knowledge or schemata. This leads us to the next sub-topic in this chapter, that is, the schema theory.

#### **2.4.4 The Schema Theory and background knowledge**

According to the schema theory, people understand new experiences by activating relevant schemas (also called schemata) in their minds. A schema is a mental representation based on prior knowledge or background knowledge. The schema theory was propounded by Bartlett (1932) and was further developed during the 1970's in the 'artificial intelligence' work on perception and text processing (Shank and Abelson.1977).

The schema theory is important to language teaching and can help explain students' comprehension problems and suggest the kind of background knowledge they need. According to Cook (1997) the importance of schematic knowledge is now widely acknowledged in language teaching theory and linked in particular to the importance of developing cultural knowledge in learners. The

background knowledge that students bring to learning has important implications for reading and these implications are supported by the schema-theories of reading and language comprehension. According to Carrel and Eisterhold (1983), cited by Cook (1997:86), in the 1980's, the schema theory became an important component of the reading theory.

There are a number of views arguing that the reader's background knowledge contributes towards comprehension of the text being read. Whether or not the reader had been exposed to the issues in the text would help the reader to read meaning into the text. Amos (1996) is of the opinion that in an attempt to construct meaning out of a text, the L2 reader would have to rely more on context and on guessing, simply because, the L2 reader has to compensate for the lack of good linguistic skills. Amos says that the disadvantage for the L2 reader is related to reduced 'automaticity' of the reading process. Wallace (1992) is of the view that to compensate for the lack of well-developed 'automized skills', readers should be given tasks where background knowledge, context and task work together to help readers achieve their goal. This focus on background knowledge contributed to the popularization of the schema theory. Vacca and Vacca (1996) explained that schema reflects the experiences, conceptual understandings, attitudes, values, skills and strategies that a reader brings to a text situation. They defined 'schema' as a technical term which is used by 'cognitive scientists' to describe how people organize and store information in their heads. Furthermore, it was said that whenever readers use their background knowledge to construct meaning of the

material they are reading, then, they are in a 'strategic position' to learn with the text. Rumelhart (1982) supported the importance of the schema theory when he referred to schemata as 'the building blocks of cognition' as they represent the networks of information' that people use in order to make sense of new stimuli, events and situations. As such, schemata has a great influence over learning. According to Vacca and Vacca (1996), when a match occurs between students' background knowledge and text materials, schema allows the reader to;

- a) seek and select information by making inferences about the text through anticipation of content and predictions.
- b) organise and integrate new text information into old to facilitate the ability to retain and remember.
- c) elaborate information by engaging in a 'cognitive process' that involves deeper levels of insight, judgement and evaluation.

(Vacca,R and Vacca,A, 1996:16)

In addition, Pearson and Spiro (1982) put forward that inadequacies in schema are responsible for the many 'roadblocks' to reading comprehension. Vacca and Vacca (1996) had identified three kinds of schema related problems which can interfere with understanding. They are schema availability, schema selection and schema maintenance. In schema availability problems, it was stated that, students may lack the relevant background knowledge and information needed to comprehend a text assignment. In schema selection problems, students who already have the background may not be aware

of the importance of using it in the reading process and may fail to use it as they read. In the third problem of schema maintenance, students may not be aware or skilled to recognize when changes occur in schema during reading. They may not know how and when to adapt schemata as the reading situation demands. When this happens, somehow, while reading, the reading process breaks down. In order to determine whether the students possess, select or maintain the correct schemata, it was suggested, that, the teacher make suitable preparation for prereading and also decide on how much background building and skill direction will be necessary.

The importance of background knowledge in the area of reading is also supported by Parker (1959) who believed that by evaluating what you read and associating the information with what you know, you will read with more understanding and will remember it better.

On the other hand, Cook (1997) had also voiced doubts about the strength of schemas. Cook said that schemas can also be restrictive.

“...a negative stereotype... is a schema, which leads to a refusal to perceive new information or to change one's ideas. In unfamiliar situations, attention to detail and a willingness to abandon and change our schemas are still the hallmarks of a flexible and open mind...”

(Cook,G,1997)

The next section deals with literature on content area reading and the importance of teaching reading.

#### **2.4.5 Content area reading and the importance of teaching reading**

Lee (1994:44) cited Whipple (1925) proclaiming that every teacher should be a teacher of reading.

It was noted by Lee (1994) that 'content-area reading' ( that is, the study of reading problems in subject matter areas) had been researched widely in countries like the United States and Great Britain. However, in Malaysia and the neighbouring region, Lee (1994) had found only three studies .These studies were done by Ngeow (1983), Oh (1986) and Bamrung (1986). These studies revealed that low language proficiency was the underlying reason for poor overall academic performance, and, a related problem was poor reading activities (Ngeow,1983). In the study by Oh (1986), the main problem when reading textbooks was identified by the teachers as the students' poor command of the language and in Bamrung (1986) the discovery made was that subject teachers had a positive attitude towards reading instruction in the content areas.

What to teach and how to teach are problems faced by many classroom teachers. Vacca and Vacca (1996) explained that for some teachers, using texts to teach content contributed to the problem, while, for others, showing students how to learn with texts was part of the solution. It was stressed that texts will continue to be indispensable tools for constructing knowledge, sharing experiences and ideas and developing new insights and perspectives. With regard to content area reading, Tierney and Pearson (1992) suggested that the expression 'learning from texts' be changed to 'learning with texts'. Learning with texts suggests that readers



have a lot to contribute to the process as they interact with the texts to 'make meaning and construct knowledge'.

The researcher in the present study was concerned about the state of reading among the English Option trainee teacher in M.P.B.P. In looking for the reading problems and inadequacies of the trainee teachers, this study focussed on the group of forty seven English Option trainee teachers, their SES, the relationship between their SES and their attitude towards the English language, the English course and towards reading in English. This study approached their inadequacies in reading English text by looking into the causes of reading problems.

A lot of concern has also been expressed by parents, legislators, educators and administrators regarding reading. This concern is especially about the 'teaching of reading' and this has been highlighted by Leu and Kinzer (1987:13). As the present study is dealing with teacher trainees, the researcher saw a relevance to look into the aspect of 'teaching reading'. Parents, legislators, educators and administrators, in Leu and Kinzer's study, said that 'teaching reading' is a challenge as many people consider reading an important part of the primary school curriculum. As such, there has been a lot of attention on what is done to teach reading. One reason for it being a challenge is because reading is a complex developmental process. Thus, learning to teach reading would also be complex. It was stated further that another reason is the diversity of the reading

abilities of the learner and individual difficulties in reading. This diversity of needs and abilities makes it challenging to teach reading.

Therefore, in order to teach reading it would be advisable for the learner as well as the teacher to consider the strategies involved in successful reading.

#### **2.4.6 Reading strategies**

There has been a substantial amount of research to establish the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency. According to Vacca and Vacca (1996), metacognitive knowledge and the ability to use reading and learning strategies are closely linked and this link helps to explain why many students have difficulty learning effectively. In the 1980's there was a focus on solving problems in reading by trying to understand these strategies. The importance given to strategies based on the 'learning process' was very obvious when Stern and Cummins (1981) in their study on foreign language education, emphasised that the 'process of learning' is the most important issue to be researched. They said that research into the 'process of learning' should be given priority.

The aspect of learning strategies is also stressed upon by other researchers. A study carried out by Wen (1997:237) emphasized that 'a person with high expectations of learning strategies and efforts' would be actively involved in learning. Wen discovered that students who were highly motivated to learn the language for a certain purpose had high expectations and were willing to make

efforts and to use effective strategies in their learning Oxford and Shearin (1994:21) define 'expectation' as the 'effort that will lead to successful performance'. It was stated that expectations of learning strategies and of efforts were assumed to be 'direct indicators of motivation'. A learner employs certain strategies when learning because the learner expects these strategies to achieve the intended purpose.

It was cited by Johnstone (1995) that, in the early 80's, Oxford had developed an instrument to assess language learning strategies and it was termed SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning). Oxford and Burry Stock (1995) had provided a summary account of the different instruments for strategy assessment. Thus, there was a substantial emphasis on the strategies employed by learners.

A term highlighted by Johnstone (1995:148) which received attention is 'strategy training'. He stressed that 'strategy training' is an important component in any approach to learner-training, 'inducting learners into an understanding and use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies'. An important complementary concept to this was introduced by Wenden (1995:96-7) and she called it 'task-knowledge'. Wenden identified three key components of task-knowledge and they were 'task purpose' (Why should I do this task?), 'task classification' (What sort of task is it?) and 'task demands' (How should I do the task?). Wenden (1995) strongly felt that the selection of appropriate strategies will depend very much on knowledge derived from the task classification.

An empirical study cited by Johnstone (1995:148), identified certain strategies used by successful second language readers. It was suggested that successful readers were more advanced in decoding and also more able to evaluate and draw on their own prior knowledge. The findings of this study suggested that strategy-training did indeed improve L2 reading performance. This means that training to use the appropriate reading strategies could bring about success in reading comprehension. Similarly, while reading, the appropriate strategies employed by the reader to achieve the purpose of the task will certainly determine success in reading comprehension.

Hosenfeld (1992 ) contributed greatly to a growing emphasis on the process of reading rather than the product. This was in contrast to the traditional teaching and research practices. The new approach emphasizing on process focussed on the ways in which readers approached problems. Hosenfeld (1992), had done research focussing on solving reading problems by uncovering the kinds of strategies students used in performing language tasks. She tried to understand the strategies used when the readers confronted problems. She described a reading strategy as consisting of two categories of operations; what students do when they read in a relatively uninterrupted manner (their 'non-stop' reading behaviour) and what they do when they come to unknown words (their 'interrupted' reading behaviour).

In addition, she classified and categorized the types of strategies that readers used when reading foreign language texts. They were the linguistic

category as in identifying the form class of words, the semantic category related to, for example, readers' attempts to make sense of a text and the paralinguistic category as in relating verbal information to visuals and tables. Hosenfeld strongly felt that studying reading strategies would help to focus on the ways to solve reading problems.

Many other studies have been carried out in the area of reading strategies. For instance, Duran, Revlin and Havill (1995) in a study on Latino high school students, had uncovered evidence of adaptive information processing strategies used by students to compensate for difficulties in comprehending reading. In the report by Duran, Revlin and Havill it was noted that Collins and Smith (1982) identified specific cognitive strategies used by readers encountering comprehension difficulties. These strategies, it was reported, applied to readers regardless of language background and these strategies were;

- Suspending judgement about what a word or sentence or a relationship means.
- Forming a tentative hypothesis about a meaning.
- Rereading the current sentence or sentences.
- Skipping back and rereading text from a previous context.
- Getting help from an expert source.

These strategies of interaction with text and learner characteristics had been investigated using ESL students and non-ESL students at the college level. In relation to this, in a study by Goldman and Duran (1988) in which text

passages and passage questions on oceanography were presented to students taking courses in this subject, it was discovered that, regardless of expertise in the subject matter, ESL students tended to expend more effort on understanding a target text. The results from a series of studies by Goldman (1988) showed that both native English speakers and ESL students used a mixture of three global reading strategies:

- a) Reading a text all the way through then quitting;
- b) Reading a text all the way through then going back to reread portions; and
- c) Stopping and rereading throughout a text.

There are numerous other studies focussing on reading strategies. Basically, the emergence of research in the area of the reading process and reading strategies used, was to understand the reading comprehension difficulties and problems faced by readers. According to Hosenfeld (1992:246) the intention of the researchers was to gain fresh insights into the reading process in order to help relatively unsuccessful readers improve their reading in a foreign language.

#### **2.4.7 Other studies on problems in reading comprehension**

Many researchers agree that in order to understand how a text is comprehended by the reader, it is necessary to look into the reading processes of readers and thus, a number of models of the reading process have emerged.

Augstein and Thomas (1992:272) suggested that a useful model of the reading process is needed in order to describe;

- a) the complexity and variety of structure in the reader's purposes, strategies and outcomes;
- b) the hierarchical nature of purpose, strategy and outcome;
- c) the uniquely personal relationship which can exist between purpose, strategy and outcome within an individual's system of attributing meaning to a text;
- d) the active and interactive aspects of the ongoing relationship between the reader and the text.

It is believed that a skilled reader would sample, search, select and relate items of meaning in a text in a manner that makes sense to the reader. The problem in comprehension occurs, according to the study by Augstein and Thomas (1992), when there is a mismatch between expected meaning and what is being read. Therefore, the process of attributing meaning to the text is hindered. They say that if the reader has a strategy, the searching would lead to revised meaning. If not, there will be a problem as the reader can no longer attribute meaning to the text. A number of other studies have researched a variety of other problems. These problems are related to areas such as, inadequate vocabulary, text difficulties like syntactical and lexical difficulties, readability factors, time factor, reader's experience, background knowledge and individual differences.

A study carried out by Cooper (1992) on students from the Malay medium and the English medium of education, indicated that poor knowledge of vocabulary could be a severe disadvantage to readers. Developing vocabulary is a very important element in building concepts that are relevant. Rubin (1993:243) had stressed that concept development of readers is based on word meanings and without vocabulary, there would be no concepts as there would be no basis for the development of concepts. She added that students who build vocabulary consciousness would be at a general advantage. Vocabulary consciousness refers to the ability to recognise the power of words and their ability to have different meanings based on different words. According to Rubin (1993:246), vocabulary develops when the readers do the following;

- a) Become aware of words they do not know;
- b) Have a desire to unlock the meanings of unfamiliar words;
- c) Become interested in gaining insight into the strategies for recognising words and for expanding vocabulary;
- d) Try to determine the meaning of words from the context and from their knowledge of word parts;
- e) Learn the most used combining forms;
- f) Jot down words they do not know and look them up later in the dictionary;
- g) Keep a notebook handy to write down words they have missed in their vocabulary exercises;



- h) Learn to break down words into parts to learn their meanings;
- i) Maintain interest in wanting to expand this vocabulary.

Rubin added that readers' problems in a content area may occur because they do not have the prerequisite vocabulary. Alderson and Richards (1977) had shown that of all the problems, vocabulary problems contributed the most to text difficulties.

Furthermore, many words have more than one meaning and these meanings are sometimes determined by the position (syntax) of the word in a sentence and from meaning (semantic) clues of the surrounding words. This is what is referred to as context, that is, the words surrounding a word that can shed light on its meaning. A context clue is the surrounding information that helps the reader to figure out the meaning. In a study done by Cooper (1992), it was discovered that unsuccessful readers did not understand the tasks of certain words like sentence connectors as well as other cohesive relationships. They did not understand meaning relationships above the sentence level and, thus, their reading was severely handicapped.

Another problem is that related to text difficulties. According to Alderson and Urquhart (1993), a considerable amount of research has been done in those areas of text that cause difficulty to readers. Berman (1992:139) looked into the role of syntactic problems. She investigated the effect of 'syntax' on foreign language readers and concluded that in reading, syntactic decoding does not 'proceed in isolation from semantic factors'. The view here is that efficient readers

must rely on syntactic devices like, 'unraveling' of parts of sentences and perception of their grammatical and rhetorical interrelations, in order to get at text meaning. Bever (1970) argues that it was crucial in language perception and decoding, that, readers recognise the basic parts of a sentence such as, subject-verb-object ordering.

However, a number of studies have shown a low correlation between syntax and reading ability. Studies such as those done by Cooper (1992), Alderson and Richards (1977) and Schlesinger (1968) resulted in indications that syntactic complexity did not significantly cause processing difficulties.

Another factor which influences reading ability is readability of the text. Alderson and Urquhart (1992) had noted that readability is related to word difficulty and to the complexity of sentence structures. Other text related problems mentioned are to do with the organization of the text. Studies by Kintch and Van Dijk (1978), Meyer (1975), Rumelhart (1977) and Thorndyke (1977) produced results to show that global text organization influences how a reader recalls the text.

Other than text related issues, factors concerning the reader can also contribute towards problems in reading comprehension. These factors would include individuality of readers and their purpose and motivation. Individuality of readers has been researched to study further into effects of background and cultural knowledge, attitudes, SES and interests. Strang (1972) had said that different readers will arrive at different products as they start from different

points. Alderson and Urquhart (1992) had highlighted studies done by Bransford et al. (1992) and Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1992) who referred to the effect of background knowledge and cultural knowledge on reading and comprehension.

Royer et al. (1992) reported that the reader's intent or purpose affected reading comprehension. This view has also been supported by Chittravolu (1975). Fransson (1992) had carried out a study which supports that the reader's motivation affects not only the product of comprehension but also the process of understanding.

Another problem related to reading comprehension, is the lack of effective reading strategies. This awareness has come about with the diversion of focus towards the reading process rather than the product. Alderson and Urquhart (1992) argued that the process underlies the product. They said that the basic rationale for this was to try to distinguish the processing strategies of successful and unsuccessful readers. This, they felt, should lead to the possibility of teaching the effective strategies of successful readers to those who are not or, at least, make them aware of the existence of other strategies. Other studies supporting this rationale were done by Hosenfeld (1992), Augstein and Thomas (1992) and Fransson (1992).

Urquhart (1992) raised the issue of limited time, especially, in relation to the existing courses studied. Based on the various researches into causes of difficulty for foreign language readers, it was discovered that the problem arose from the need to efficiently teach students to read in a short space of time.

Another problem emphasized by Williams and Dallas (1992) was the difficulty of finding authors of texts with a combination of classroom teaching experience, an awareness of the reading level of the target reading group and sensitivity to principles of readable writing. Most writers of content text, when writing it, would not have given sufficient consideration to the matters of readability.

Studies focussing on reading comprehension and its problems are numerous in number and they have managed to shed light on many areas of concern. It is hoped that these studies have made findings which are relevant to the reading of a second and foreign language (Alderson and Urquhart,1992:xv).

## **2.5 SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ACADEMIC BACKGROUND AS FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO READING PROBLEMS**

To start with,

Socioeconomic class, parents' education and the neighbourhood in which children live are some of the factors that shape the home environment.

(Rubin,D,1993:31)

The role that socioeconomic status (SES) plays in literacy development has been given acknowledgement in recent research. According to Rasinski and Fredericks (1989), the potential for parents to help their children in learning to read is tremendous. A number of studies have been done in this area. These studies show that most voluntary participation or involvement on the part

of parents comes from homes where the SES is higher rather than from the lower SES homes. It has been acknowledged by Rubin (1993), that, those children who come from homes where parents are more involved perform generally better in school. One key concept mentioned by Rubin (1993:481) is that all parents need to be literate in order to contribute towards success in their children's learning. She further supported the view that the encouragement provided by parents from average and high SES reflects their high expectations for literacy development. These parents help instill values which ensure success in reading and writing activities.

Studies have also been done on reading to children and its relationship to SES. There seems to be a difference in the way which high SES parents read stories aloud to their children and the way in which low SES parents do it. Sulzby and Teale (1991:736) support the view that there is a difference in their approaches to reading. The language and social interaction while reading and how parents relate the story can greatly influence their children's 'ultimate literacy achievement'. Research has shown that SES has a strong influence over reading abilities and is important in moulding a person. Children with parents of high SES tend to read extensively at home and they show higher reading achievement than those who do not. This is supported by Anderson et al. (1985) cited by Eggen and Kauchak (1994). They said that high SES parents had more reading materials such as, books, newspapers, encyclopedias and magazines around the house and read more themselves.

In a study cited by Eggen and Kauchak (1994:162), it was found that other than reading materials, educational activities, such as, visits to history museums, borrowing books from the library and lessons outside of school such as music, religion and computer, not only complement and reinforce classroom learning, but, also provide 'an experiential link between home and school'. Research has found that the level of parents' education is most influential in school performance. In other words, SES has a strong influence over the background experiences that children bring to school.

The next chapter discusses the research methodology used in this study.