

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The new millennium will see a world that will no longer be divided along the lines of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', but the 'knows' and 'don't-knows'. Indeed, the Age of Information is well underway. Those who have more information, and hence, more knowledge will move ahead, while those who do not, will be left behind. Information can be acquired through various means, but none can dispute reading as the key that opens the proverbial door to an unlimited store of knowledge. Today, students have to read extensively and intensively in order to cope with the information explosion, much of which is in English. For many students whose first language is not English, this can pose a monumental problem.

Of the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing, reading is arguably the skill that determines the pace of language acquisition as well as information / knowledge acquisition. In the ESL context, what this means is that, the more students read, the faster they will improve their English and increase their knowledge, assuming of course that they understand what they read.

While the focus of this study is L2 reading and its attendant problems in the context of Malaysian high schools, it is necessary to look first at the L2 that is, ESL situation in the country as reading is essentially a language activity. Many of the problems associated with reading in English as a second language are directly linked to problems students have in learning the language. A negative attitude towards

learning English translates into an equally negative attitude towards reading in English.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The KBSM English language curriculum states that by the time students leave school at the end of Form 5, they should be able to

- listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations;
- speak effectively on a variety of topics;
- read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment; and
- write effectively for different purposes.

(Curriculum Specifications for English Language for Form 5: 1991)

How far have these objectives been achieved? Statements issued by officials from the Ministry of Education and comments from educationists all seem to point to the same conclusion - the standard of English has deteriorated steadily over the years. Figures released by the Ministry of Education in 1986 and cited by Talif and Edwin (1990) revealed that the subject with the lowest pass rate in the SRP was English. More recently, in the 1999 SPM results, the position has remained virtually unchanged. Out of a total of 34 subjects offered in the examination, the subject with the lowest pass rate of 61.7% was still English – a further 0.4% drop from 62.1% in 1998. (The Star: 5 April 2000)

This continuing decline is of grave concern to the Ministry, teachers as well as parents. However, this decline should be seen against the backdrop of ESL

developments over the last three decades. In 1970, Malay replaced English as the medium of instruction in Standard 1. By the end of 1980, the conversion was fully implemented in all levels in secondary schools nationwide. (Asiah Abu Samah: 1994) With exposure to English drastically reduced, it would be unreasonable to expect from the post-1970 students the same high standard of English proficiency as from those who were taught in the English medium prior to 1970. To quote McCracken (1996:31), “You should consider establishing ESL standards, not native-speaker (or near native-speaker) standards for our students who are, after all, studying English as a second language.”

But having said that, it is an undeniable fact that our students are performing way too far below even the most modest expectations. Given all the supportive measures taken by the government, in particular, the Ministry of Education in promoting English, and bearing in mind that secondary school students have been learning English on the average of five 40-minute periods a week for 11 years, the question that begs to be asked is: why is it that the majority of our students finish their secondary school education barely able to speak coherent English or write in grammatically correct English?

1.1.1 THE LANGUAGE PROBLEM → THE READING PROBLEM

It is imperative to examine the factors that contribute towards the poor performance of students in English in order to understand their reluctance to read in English. After all, as Wallace (1992:3) puts it, “Reading is, above all to do with

language". For the purpose of this study, only those factors that have bearing on the research topic will be discussed here.

- **The 'unclear' status of English in our country.**

Officially, English is to be taught as a 'strong second language'. (Third Malaysia Plan: 1976) But in reality, English has assumed the status of a weak and distant second language in urban government schools, a third language in independent Chinese schools, and a foreign language in rural government schools. Sargunan (1987:37) believes it is an oversimplification to label English as a second language. According to Datuk Abdul Aziz Ismail, former Deputy Director-General 1 of the Ministry of Education, "...in reality, English is a compulsory foreign language in all primary and secondary schools." (Compendium 1989:v) Rajah (1990:110) offers another definition – the term 'second language' does not refer to a second language in the true linguistic sense. Instead the term is used to mean that English is second only to Bahasa Malaysia in importance for all official purposes. McRae (1992:33) refers to this problem as 'an identity crisis' with the crux of the problem lying somewhere between ESL and EFL. Perhaps, in our unique Malaysian context, it would be more appropriate to refer to the language as ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages. As long as the status of English remains controversial, difficulties will arise with regard to materials development. In other words, if materials are written at a language level way beyond that of the students' proficiency level, it will result in an ever-widening gap between target-level proficiency and actual level of proficiency.

- **Lack of an immediate need to use English.**

While there is no lack of government support and initiative in promoting English as a second language, students themselves do not take advantage of these opportunities to practise English. After all, why should they when they can get by so easily in their first language for their daily communicational needs? As for students in the rural areas, Asiah Abu Samah (1994) holds the view that the opportunities for them to apply what they have learned in their English classes are almost non-existent. Former Minister of Education, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has acknowledged that rural students are generally weak in English as they do not use the language outside the classroom. (The New Straits Times: 3 April 1999) This lack of motivation poses a huge obstacle as students have little incentive to improve their proficiency in English. This in turn discourages them from reading anything in English.

Furthermore, although English is officially recognized as a language that will enable Malaysia to engage in local and international trade and commerce, provide an additional means of access to academic, professional, and recreational materials, these are '*post* secondary school needs'. (Curriculum Specifications for English Language for Form 4:1990) As such, students adopt a lackadaisical attitude towards learning the language as they do not see any immediate need to learn the language well.

- **Lack of a strong 'push' factor in learning English.**

In an examination-oriented society like ours, students will make the effort to study a subject if they must pass it, or if it is related to their future academic or

career pursuits. However, although English is a compulsory core subject, failure in the subject at PMR and SPM levels does not affect their overall grade standing. Furthermore, most government school students pursue higher education in local universities where the medium of instruction is Malay, so there is no real need for them to put extra effort into being proficient in English. Thus, any attempt to promote reading as a means of improving language proficiency will likely be met with indifference at best, or resistance at worst.

- **Lack of a positive attitude towards English**

Although Malaysia has been independent since 1957, the old view that English is the language of the colonial masters still exists today. To many, English is also variously regarded as the language of the 'decadent' West, of an alien culture, and of the urban middle class. To them, the acquisition of English is seen as a necessary evil (Gaudart:1987:34). And this attitude often spills over to their children, making it more difficult for the latter to have any intrinsic desire to acquire English. Perhaps, it is time to put to permanent rest the controversy surrounding the language issue. As the former Director General of Education, Tan Sri Murad Md. Noor has said, "We have achieved our target of making BM the national language. We have to turn our attention now to English, to bring it up to its status as a strong second language." (cited in Sargunan:1987:38)

1.1.2 THE BENEFITS OF READING

One of the more often-heard laments from teachers is that students do not read. That is why their grammar is weak, their vocabulary is poor and their essays

lack ideas. Fatimah Hamid Don and Safiah Osman (1987) believe that the non-reader today is a severely handicapped person. Ratnawati Mohd. Asraf (1996) reports that in a recent survey conducted on 600 ESL secondary school teachers in Selangor to assess their views towards the KBSM English syllabus, the majority felt that reading should be the primary focus of the syllabus. It would appear then that reading is an effective solution to the low language proficiency of our students. This view is supported by Nuttall (1996:128) who believes that "The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it." Looking at the language problem from this perspective, it is easy to see why our schools are producing students who can barely communicate in English, and who have hardly any knowledge of anything outside the ambit of their own interests. Simply put, our students lack a reading habit, whether it is reading to learn or reading for enjoyment.

Reading in any language is important but reading in English is crucial for three main reasons.

a. Language improvement

In a reading project conducted by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) involving 380 fourth and fifth grade students, it was found that after two years of reading high-interest story books, the students made far greater progress in language learning than the non-reading control group. In addition, the results of the students who read were significantly better in all their school subjects. Smith (1994) argues that it is only through reading that anyone can learn all the conventions of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, even grammar, and style. In other words, authors teach

readers about writing. Kim and Krashen (1997) concur with Smith. According to them, reading helps students to enrich their vocabulary; improve their grammar, spelling and punctuation, write better essays; and raise their oral/aural competence.

b. Better reading skills

The reading component in the curriculum specifications for English for Form 4 (1990) states that students must be taught these skills :

- comparing
- classifying
- predicting
- determining relevance
- using contextual clues
- inferring
- differentiating fact and opinion
- generalizing
- summarizing
- distinguishing fact and opinion
- relating content to own experiences
- understanding different language registers
- interpreting tables, charts, and graphs
- understanding and using study skills

Obviously the more one reads, the more practice one will have in these skills. Smith (1994) believes that experience in reading leads to more knowledge about

reading and students who read more also tend to have better comprehension skills. Nuttall (1996:127) shares the same view about reading: reading teaches reading in the virtuous circle of the good reader. In the new 1997 SPM format for the English Language paper, the importance of reading is evident. The reading skills are tested more than any of the other skills. Paper One focuses entirely on testing the reading skills, while in Paper Two, reading is required in two of the three sections. Hopefully, this emphasis on reading in the SPM English paper will prove to a strong incentive in motivating students to read in English.

c. Access to knowledge

In knowledge acquisition, it goes without saying that the more one reads, the more one knows. This is especially true in the context of higher education where students are required to read extensively and intensively in order to write their assignments and research papers. Fatimah Hamid Don and Safiah Osman (1987:73) estimate that most undergraduates spend 80-90 per cent of their study time on reading. Although the medium of instruction is Malay, much of the academic reading is still in English. Reading today encompasses reading in the print media and the electronic media. According to a report commissioned by the British Council, in the print media, 28% of publications in the world are in English, followed by Chinese at a distant second with 13.3%. In the electronic media, the percentage is even higher for English. It has been estimated that 84.3% of the World Wide Web sites on the Internet are in English. (Graddol:1997)

d. Empowerment through reading

With the rising popularity of self-directed learning, how fast one progresses in one's education and career ultimately depends on how well one is able to cope with the information explosion. Furthermore, English has been elevated to a global language. Crystal (1997) defines a language as having achieved a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in *every* country. It follows that proficiency in English coupled with access to knowledge gained through extensive reading in the language will go a long way towards empowering one with the ability and the confidence to participate actively in the interconnected world of the new millennium.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For all the above reasons, we can see the importance of reading in English. To this end, the Ministry of Education has taken a proactive stand towards promoting the reading culture among Malaysians. In an article on reading initiatives in Malaysia, Ramaiah (1994) lists past efforts to promote reading. These include designating 1988 as the Year of the Reader, launching the Malaysian Reading Association in 1990, introducing the English Language Reading Programme (ELRP), the Class Reader Programme and the University of Malaya's English for Specific Purposes (UMESSP). Sad to say, all these projects have met with limited success.

Malaysians in general and students in particular do not read. Yet one of the KBSM English Language objectives is that students 'should be able to read and

understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment' (see page 2). How can the reading habit be promoted among students? How can they be encouraged to read in English when they regard reading in English as tedious and burdensome rather than pleasurable, worthwhile and satisfying? They will only read in English if they have no alternative choice of reading materials, or if they are forced to do so by their teachers.

This brings us to the issue of ESL textbooks used in the classroom. As students hardly do much extensive reading in English outside the classroom, the ESL textbook is their main source of English reading materials. Thus it plays a vital role in helping students learn English and develop an interest in reading. Although there are teachers who produce their own materials and some who use other sources of materials, Pillay and North (1997) believe that most teachers depend to a large extent on the textbooks, as the nature of their job does not allow them the luxury of developing their own materials. Since every student is required to have a copy of the textbook, one possible solution to the reading problem is to use the reading texts in the textbook to motivate the students and teach the reading skills. But here again, teachers face another problem. Most students suffer from an anti-textbook syndrome. Lester (1998:282) questions why many high school students intensely dislike their textbooks. What is it about this particular type of reading activity that brings out such negative feelings? Hutchinson (1994:315) asks a similar question. Why, given the extent of the influence of textbooks, does there appear to be at best apathy and at worst hostility to them in academic circles? This attitude towards reading seems to be the norm in our Malaysian classrooms.

There are a number of reasons for this negative attitude towards reading from the textbook.

- **Readability of the texts**

The typical ESL class in urban Malaysian schools is of mixed ability. It is a problem for textbook writers to decide at which level of proficiency to pitch their materials. Although they are reminded to take into account the wide range in proficiency among the students and the urban-rural variability, this is easier said than done. Most textbook writers compromise by writing for the average students who form the largest group in the class. However, argues Asiah Abu Samah (1988), by catering to the average student, the handful of high flyers would find the textbook too simple and therefore, boring, while at the other end, the low achievers would find themselves struggling to cope with the texts.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education considers English as a second language, but as mentioned earlier (see page 4), in reality this is not the case. If textbooks are written on the assumption that English is taught as a second language, then the materials would not be suitable for students to whom English is a third language or a foreign language. This problem was raised as far back as 1970 when it was found that in Malaysian classrooms, L1 texts were constantly being used in an L2 situation. (Reid:1970) Sadly, this mismatch still exists today. The only difference is that L2 texts are now used in L3 or FL situations.

- **Needs and Interests of the students**

In teaching reading from the textbook, there is a tendency to overlook the suitability of the materials in meeting the needs and interests of the students. Since the materials are already there in the ministry-approved textbooks, teachers “rotely, robotically or unthinkingly” go through the materials to finish the syllabus. (McCracken:1996:27) She suggests that teachers as professionals should be creative and adapt materials to match their students’ needs and interests.

In a recent related study carried out by Toh and Raja (1997), it was found that most of the 800 students in a rural school in the upper reaches of the Baram River in Sarawak had problems in reading. Many of the Form 5 students could not understand the reading passages in their KBSM textbooks recommended by the Ministry. This was because much of the material featured themes and topics which were outside their realm of experience and not relevant to their immediate environment and the realities of their experiences. The findings led to the teachers embarking on a writing project to produce their own materials that would address the needs and interests of their students.

- **Thematic approach of the textbook**

The KBSM textbooks adopt a thematic approach in the organization of the skills and the contents. In such an approach, a particular topic is selected to fit the theme and all other learning skills and language items are matched to the topic. One major drawback of this approach is that the selected topic while suitable for teaching other language skills may not be suitable for teaching reading skills. A case in point is the topic of ‘How to fix a leaking tap’ for the theme of

‘Understanding instructions’. It is doubtful that students would be motivated to read a passage based on such a topic. Furthermore, the syllabus is very specific in terms of themes and topics to be covered. Khong (1986:81) feels that these specifications may seem somewhat constraining. Textbook writers who keep strictly to the literal specifications may end up creating situations that are unreal. In addition, teachers may find themselves concentrating more on teaching the topic rather than teaching the language and the skills of reading. As a result, the students tend to concentrate on learning the contents rather than on learning the language and the skills of reading. These are some of the constraints of being tied to the topic. (Pillay and North:1997)

- **Scope of the English Language Programme**

The National Education Philosophy states that

“Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and a devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as able to contribute to the betterment of the society and the nation at large.”

Ministry of Education 1989

(Education Guide Malaysia 1993/94:10)

The National Education Philosophy is reflected in the English Language Programme as stated below:

“The English Language Programme is planned in accordance with the National Education Philosophy which has as its core the concept of lifelong education geared towards the development of a morally upright person who is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically integrated.

The English Language Programme as part of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) is yet another avenue for the realisation of the goals of the National Education Philosophy. Besides developing the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and the accompanying grammar, sound system and vocabulary, the English Language Programme also seeks to educate students in the larger context of life, towards producing citizens who are knowledgeable, who have high moral standards and who are able to contribute to the betterment of the society and the nation.”

(Curriculum Specifications for English Language Form 5: 1991:v)

While the ideals enshrined in the National Education Philosophy are noble and laudable, one wonders whether they should be overtly incorporated into the English Language Programme, given the problems faced by students in learning the language. As it is, students are already grappling with the basics of the language. To overtly teach them morals and also expect them to understand difficult content topics like manufacturing processes and environmental issues in a medium that they are not proficient in is akin to double taxation! In the long run, the student ends up still weak

in English and may develop an even stronger aversion towards reading from the textbook.

Furthermore, because the textbook-writer is guided by the curriculum specifications which are in turn based on the National Education Philosophy, he has limited flexibility in selecting topics that would motivate students to read and learn. For example, a topic like learning to fix a leaking tap should be in L1 medium and taught in the Kemahiran Hidup or Living Skills class, not the ESL class. Likewise, a story based on moral values like public-spiritedness may fit better in the L1 Pendidikan Moral or Moral Education class.

The point to be made here is that the National Education Philosophy can still be upheld through the L1 medium and through other subjects. The textbook-writer would thus be free to choose topics that are of teenage and current interest to students and that are relevant to their L2 needs. Once the L2 proficiency of the students has improved, they will be able to read more difficult expository texts. The print media and commercial publishers are leading the way by promoting reading as fun in efforts like the NIE programme, YouthQuake, Youth2, and magazines like Quest and The Malaysian Student. Indeed, many teachers are resorting to using materials from these sources for their reading classes because of the positive feedback from their students.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Given the importance of reading particularly in language improvement and knowledge acquisition, the purpose of this study, therefore, is to find out what type of texts would motivate our students to read.

While most studies in the field of reading focus on teaching reading skills, this study will examine the role of the text as a starting point for motivating students to read. This is a view that Thurgood (1995) shares. He believes that for several generations, much of our research was focused on methods. More 'mundane' concerns like materials and materials writing have been assigned second class status, and treated as if they are only of minor importance. The findings would form the basis of the criteria for the selection of materials or texts that would motivate reading and thus facilitate the teaching and learning of the various reading skills. The comprehension passages in the KBSM textbooks would be evaluated against these criteria to see if there is a possibility of a mismatch that could explain why students dislike reading from their textbooks.

In keeping with the current ELT focus on learner-centredness, motivation in relation to the learner's needs and interests will be examined from the perspective of the students themselves. The term 'learner-centred' has often been interpreted as meaning 'with the learner in mind'. However, what adults assume as motivating and relevant to young learners may not be perceived as such by the learners themselves. Lautamatti (1978) argues that these assumptions may be so far off the mark that the students are not motivated to read the materials. Johnson (1989) defines a learner-

centred curriculum as one where the learners themselves determine policy through *their* perceptions of their needs as opposed to what curriculum planners or textbook writers *assume* are their needs.

The study will seek answers to these research questions:

1. How far do setting, gender, stream (science, arts/commerce) and language proficiency contribute to differences in reading interests among students?
2. What type of text topics would motivate students to read?
3. Is there any mismatch in the ranking of text topics by students and by teachers?
4. How far do the text topics in the reading section of the Form Four KBSM textbooks reflect the reading interests of students?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There has been a lot of research done on L1 reading, but only recently has there been extensive research done on L2 reading. Even so, as Tickoo (1994) rightly points out, the bulk of research on L2 acquisition (including L2 reading) is focused mostly on adult learners in North America who are either immigrants or foreign students at tertiary-level centres of learning.

Furthermore, most of the research on L2 reading concentrates on the theories and processes of reading, the teaching of reading skills, early reading, the mechanics of reading, reading fluency, reading comprehension, reading assessment and reading problems. There has been a paucity of research on the suitability of L2 textbooks, in

particular, L2 reading texts to teach reading. Comments Hutchinson (1994:326), "For an industry (ELT) of this size and economic value, the amount of supported knowledge about textbooks and their use is lamentable."

On the local front, a survey of Masters and Doctoral theses by Malaysian researchers undertaken by Ramaiah (1994) reveals a similar concentration on the above-mentioned areas of reading research. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that local research on reading is overwhelmingly focused on the teaching of reading skills. There is no empirical study at all done on the role of the text in motivating students to read and the suitability of texts for teaching reading. This study hopes to be a spring-board for future research in the area of materials selection for teaching reading.

In teaching reading, teachers often concentrate on teaching comprehension with scant attention paid to the suitability of the text. Is the content of the text motivating to the students? Is the content culturally familiar to the students? Does the text match the reading proficiency of the students? Is it structured to facilitate comprehension? These are some of the questions that teachers should ask when selecting a text to teach reading. It is hoped that this study will encourage teachers (and textbook writers) to give priority to the text in teaching reading, especially to low proficiency students.

Another area that this study hopes to draw attention to is that of materials development, including the writing of textbooks. Over the years although there have been exciting changes and new approaches in materials production and textbook writing overseas, the same cannot be said about the situation in Malaysia. There

seems to be little to differentiate between a local textbook written in the 1970s and one written in the 1990s. There is an urgent need to find out why this is so.

Reading is an interactive process not unlike a dialogue between the student reader and the text, with the teacher in the role of a facilitator. Therefore, it is critical to involve the students in the selection of texts. The study hopes to highlight the importance of doing a simple needs analysis to assess the reading interests of students and the importance of taking these findings into account when selecting texts for teaching reading. Alternatively, a simple evaluation of a text could be done to identify why students found the text boring or difficult. As Lester (1998) notes, constant feedback is imperative in the collaborative process of teaching and learning. Obviously, not all of the views of students can be incorporated. However, some of them could be given serious consideration. This will result in a more conducive learning environment.

Finally, although 'materials evaluation is fundamentally a rule-of-thumb activity and that no formula, grid or system will ever provide a definite yardstick', Sheldon (1988:245) argues that it is still useful to provide some model for teachers and textbook writers that will cover most if not all the criteria. It is hoped that the findings of the study will contribute in some measure to this end.