

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

This final chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, the respondents' views on reading will be presented based on the data collected from the student's questionnaire. Because of the individual differences in reading preferences, such data would enable the research findings to be better understood and applied. In the second section, the findings will be examined in relation to the four research questions. In the third section, the more significant implications of the findings will be discussed and in the fourth section, the major limitations of the study will be considered. In the final section, recommendations for future research and some concluding remarks will be presented.

5.1 VIEWS ON READING

Below is a summary of the respondents' views vis-a-vis reading.

- Reading is not as important as the other language skills

In Table 4.2a(i), the data shows that of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, the respondents considered reading an important skill, but not quite as important as the other three skills. This ties in with their main reason for learning English which is to get a better job. To them, it is more important to know how to use the aural-oral communicative skills of listening and speaking.

- Reading is much easier to learn than the other language skills.

Of the four language skills, 42.4% of the respondents considered their proficiency in reading as either very good or good (Table 4.2b). This is the highest percentage among the four skills and can be taken to mean that the respondents probably consider the reading skill as the easiest language skill to master. If this is the case, there is a possibility that the respondents could have viewed reading as *learning to read* rather than *reading to learn*. Hence, the lack of interest and also poor comprehension in the reading class as shown by the data in Tables 4.2d and 4.2e(i).

- Reading in English is not as enjoyable as reading in L1.

The number of respondents who did not enjoy reading in English doubled compared to that for those who did not enjoy reading in their first language. In the case of those with average proficiency in English, the figure rose from 14.5% for L1 to 42.7% for English. (Table 4.2d) This could be viewed as a language problem which discourages them from reading in English, and which in turn further alienates them from the language and reading in the language, setting in motion the vicious cycle of the poor reader.

- Reading from the textbook is boring.

As shown in Table 4.2f(i), 73.3% of the respondents did not enjoy reading the passages in their textbook. Of this, the highest number, 64.2%, complained that the passages were boring. 68.0% of the teachers in the study also agreed with this complaint (Table 4.2g). There is an urgent need to address this problem.

- Reading helps one to improve one's English and increase one's knowledge.

Although the majority did not enjoy reading the passages in their textbook, they agreed that reading the passages would not only help them improve their vocabulary, grammar, spelling, pronunciation and writing, but also increase their knowledge as the data in Table 4.2h(i) shows. However, they were less certain about whether they would learn and apply the moral values taught in the reading passages, which is one of the objectives of the KBSM curriculum.

- Reading is more enjoyable when there is a choice of reading materials.

88.0% of the respondents said they would enjoy reading if they could choose their own reading materials. (Table 4.3) This is stating the obvious, but it must be noted that the reading materials used in the reading class are often teacher-selected or pre-selected for inclusion in the textbook. Freedom of choice works both for the students and for the teachers. For the students, it means they could read whatever they like *outside* their textbooks. For those teachers who faithfully adhere to the textbook, knowing that the contents of the reading passages are *not* tested, and that students generally do *not* study English to pass the SPM (Table 4.1d) would mean that they can enjoy more flexibility in selecting materials that would motivate reading.

- Books are no longer viewed as the favourite source of reading materials.

It is significant to note that books have lost their traditional role as the primary source of reading materials. Indeed, the respondents ranked books at the bottom of the list of sources of reading materials. (Table 4.3.1a). They favoured light and easy reading materials like comics and magazines, and articles from the Internet. This contrasts sharply with the data in Table 4.3.1b, which shows that the teachers in the study still

viewed newspapers and books as their preferred source of materials for teaching reading.

5.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this second section, the findings of the data analysis will be presented in order to answer each of the four research questions.

5.2.1 How far do setting, gender, stream and language proficiency contribute towards differences in reading interest among students?

In order to find out whether there were differences in reading preferences among the 236 student respondents, the findings were organized into four categories for the purpose of comparison. The categories are:

- **Setting – rural and urban**

For reading interests, the major differences were in the areas of Teen Issues, Mysteries, Health Care and Hobbies & Crafts. The respondents from the rural school gave the first three areas a much higher ranking while it was the reverse for Hobbies & Crafts with the respondents from the urban school giving this area a higher ranking. (Table 4.3.2a) Other than these four reading interests, there was little significant difference in the choices made by the student respondents from the rural school and those from the urban school. With easy access to reading materials via the mass media, electronic media, and with the world becoming increasingly borderless, the physical setting of a school has minimal influence on the reading interests of students.

- **Gender – boys and girls**

It is not surprising that the male respondents favoured areas of reading interests like Computer & Information Technology, Science & Technology and Sports. These are traditionally male-dominated areas. The female respondents, however, preferred areas of reading interests like Foreign Culture and Love Stories as these have an element of romance which appeals to the girls. (Table 4.3.2b) According to Bügel and Buunk (1996), female and male students differ in background: they have different interests and aspirations. Males are generally more interested in automobiles, technology, computers, and are more enthusiastic about sports. Females, on the other hand, tend to prefer social, home, romance, fashion, pop stars and artistic activities. Sex differences have a direct relation to the students' reading preferences.

- **Stream – science and arts/commerce**

As expected, the respondents from the science stream preferred to read about science and technology and gave this reading interest the top ranking in contrast to a ranking of 11 given by the respondents from the arts and commerce streams. (Table 4.3.2c) On the other hand, the latter rated Love Stories and Moral Values much higher than did the respondents from the science stream. However, this could be due to the fact that there are more girls than boys in the arts and commerce stream. Long term goals play a contributory role in motivating students to read certain materials. Science students and arts/commerce students would prefer to read materials that are related to their chosen field of study. Perin (1988) believes that use of materials that are of dubious relevance to students' knowledge and interests have been connected with poor progress in reading.

- **Language proficiency – good (high proficiency), weak (low proficiency)**

Overall, there appears to be little difference between what the good respondents and the weak respondents enjoyed reading. (Table 4.3.2d) The few major differences are in the areas of Mysteries and Teen Issues which enjoyed a relatively higher ranking with the good respondents while Moral Values and Environment were areas preferred by the weak respondents. Language proficiency has more bearing on motivation to read than on choice of topics. According to Alderson (1984), a high interest level in the text's content might overcome linguistic difficulty. Furthermore, a topic that is popular with students can be written or adapted so that the text becomes 'reader-friendly' or what Alderson (cited in Monahan: 1993) refers to as the concept of 'considerateness' as a goal in text design.

As reading is a highly individual activity, personal preferences are to be expected. However, while there are some differences in the middle rankings of reading interests, the same two reading interests namely, Entertainment and Adventure Stories, were listed among the top five most popular by all the eight groups. A close third is Sports as shown in Tables 4.3.3a(i) and (ii). At the other end of the ranking, four reading interests, namely, Current Affairs, Moral Values, Good Habits and Local Culture were listed among the least popular reading interests by all the eight groups (Tables 4.3.2b i-ii).

Given the list of 20 reading interests to choose from, there is surprisingly little difference in what the respondents in each of the eight groups have chosen as their most popular and least popular reading interests. This seems to suggest that reading interests among teenagers are quite homogenous. But having said that, where there are differences, they are more evident in the reading interests favoured by the male respondents and by

the female respondents, and also by the respondents in the science stream and arts / commerce stream. In other words, the factors that influence reading interest are primarily gender and stream, and to a much lesser extent, setting and language proficiency. With reading materials becoming more easily available these days, setting will have increasingly less bearing on individual reading preferences. While language proficiency does affect motivation to read, it, however, does not appear to have much effect on reading preferences. As the respondents are all in Form Four, this study does not take into account the age factor in determining reading preferences.

5.2.2 What type of text topics would motivate students to read?

From a list of 24 text topics the respondents selected those that they would be interested in reading about. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it does cover a wide variety of genres and content ranging from the narrative to the descriptive, and from local content to foreign content. Based on the data in Tables 4.3.5a(i) and 4.3.5a(ii), it is clear that stories remain a strong favourite with all the respondents. This is regardless of whether they are from a rural or an urban school, boys or girls, in the science stream or in the arts/commerce stream, or whether their English proficiency level is high or low. All eight groups ranked “The Ghost of Pulau Senja” their number one choice. The narrative form is a genre all students are familiar with, having grown up on a diet of story books during their childhood and formative years.

Other favourites are “The Making of Tarzan the Movie”, “A Day in the Life of a Radio DJ” and “The 1998 Commonwealth Games”. This confirms the findings in Tables 4.3.3a(i) and 4.3.3a(ii) which show that the respondents enjoyed reading about

Entertainment and Sports. Likewise, their choice of “The Use and Abuse of the Internet” shows that they liked to read about topics of current teen interest. Whatever the topic is, as long as it is of current teen interest, students will definitely be motivated to read more about it. The Internet is one such example, and pop culture is another.

Topics that are familiar are also popular with the respondents. “The World’s Tallest Building – the Petronas Twin Towers” is among the top five most popular topics. This could be due to the fact that they have some prior knowledge about this topic, and thus would be able to understand a text that is written about this topic. Nunan (1985), Carrell and Eisterhold (1988), Anderson and Pearson (1988) and Monahan (1993) believe that a topic that is familiar to the reader facilitates comprehension as the reader’s schemata is activated and he can draw upon his prior knowledge or background information to process his understanding of the text.

As for topics of cultural interest, the respondents seemed to be more interested in foreign culture than local culture. The findings in Tables 4.3.5c attest to this. Hence, “A Traditional Japanese Wedding” is ranked very much higher than “Islamic Art and Architecture” which they find boring and unappealing. While topics on local culture may be more familiar and relevant to them, and much easier for them to understand, (Debyasuvarn:1970; Steffensen and Joag-Dev:1984; Nelson:1987; Prodromou:1988; Safiah Osman:1992; Toh and Raja:1997), if given a choice, students would rather read texts about foreign culture or the target-language culture. Traves (1992) calls this being adventurous in reading and he fully supports it. Students should be encouraged to read materials that take them beyond the confines of their culture and experience, and that offers a challenge to their values. In a study by Ho (1998), the findings showed that

learning about English culture, for instance, is a motivating force in learning English. With the rapid spread of globalization, and with America spearheading the movement, students are more interested in reading about American culture, in particular, American pop culture, than about other cultures. According to Crystal (1997), American English has gained more widespread usage than British English.

Other topics that do not appeal to the respondents are “A Visit to a Biscuit Factory” and “The Orang Utan of Sepilok”. Such topics are probably considered of little relevance or importance to them. Also in this category are topics like “Caring for the Elderly”. This is supported by the findings in Tables 4.3.5b(i) and 4.3.5b(ii). Teenagers are constantly reminded by their parents, teachers and government leaders about their filial and civic responsibilities. As a result, any text that smacks of moral values puts them off reading it altogether. Fatimah Hashim and Lynne Norazit (1992:36) believe that “Overtly and obviously moralistic works do little to make reading fun.”

An examination of the topics also reveals that ethnicity does play a significant role in motivating reading. As most of the student respondents are Chinese, it is understandable why topics like “Siti Nurhaliza – Malaysia’s Pop Princess” and “Islamic Art and Architecture” are ranked among the least popular topics of interest. Although students are encouraged to read about the cultures and lifestyles of other races, it cannot be denied that they very much preferred to read about people they can relate to in terms of ethnicity. This is an issue that teachers should take note of when selecting materials to teach reading.

To sum up then, text topics that would motivate students to read have one or more of the following criteria:

- narratives, especially those with an element of adventure, mystery or horror
- teen interest, for example, sports and entertainment
- current interest, for example, the Internet, pop culture and the latest teen fads
- content that is familiar, and that draws upon their prior knowledge, for example, the 1998 Commonwealth Games hosted by Malaysia or Malaysia's most famous tourist attraction, the Petronas Twin Towers. This also includes topics that relate to their own race and culture. However, when it comes to a choice between local and foreign culture, there seems to be a preference for the latter.

Topics that do not motivate students to read are those that are

- of little relevance to them, for example, descriptions of processes and procedures as in "A Visit to A Biscuit Factory" and "Malaysian Products"
- about moral values or are didactic in tone such as "Caring for the Elderly" and "Qualities of a Good Leader"
- about local culture especially if it is about the culture of ethnic groups other than their own.

5.2.3 Is there any mismatch in the ranking of text topics by students and by teachers?

Overall, there are more differences in the ranking of topics by the students and by the teachers than among the students themselves as shown in Tables 4.3.5c.

The five most popular topics selected by the teachers are:

- The Use and Abuse of the Internet
- Teenage Romance
- A day in the life of a Radio DJ
- The Fast Food Phenomenon
- How to Prepare for an Interview

The five most popular topics selected by the students are:

- The Ghost of Pulau Senja – a short story
- The Making of “Tarzan the Movie”
- The Use and Abuse of the Internet
- The 1998 Commonwealth Games
- The World’s Tallest Building – the Petronas Twin Towers

The five least popular topics on the teachers’ list are:

- Malaysian Products
- Motor Sports
- The Orang Utan of Sepilok
- A Visit to a Biscuit Factory
- Islamic Art and Architecture

The five least popular topics on the students’ list are:

- The Orang Utan of Sepilok
- Malaysian Products
- Siti Nurhaliza – Malaysia’s Pop Princess

- Caring for the Elderly
- Islamic Art and Architecture

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above comparison is that while most teachers try to cater to what they assume their students would like to read, it is often not easy to predict the reading interests of their students. One possible explanation for this is the age difference between the teachers and the students. The ages of the teachers who took part in the survey ranged from 28 to 60 while the students were either 16 or 17 years old. Furthermore, most teachers are female. There is a tendency for female teachers to select 'female' topics like "Teenage Romance". Finally, as teachers, they have a duty to uphold the education policy and teach the syllabus. Thus, there is a conscious attempt to try and inculcate moral values, prepare their students for the SPM and also teach them the basic survival skills. Hence, topics like "Caring for the Elderly", "Qualities of a Good Leader" and "How to Prepare for an Interview" are ranked very much higher on the teachers' list than on the students' list.

On the other hand, teachers seem to be better at gauging what their students *don't* like to read! With the exception of the topic "Motor Sports" which was ranked 5th by the boys, and 9th overall but given a ranking of 21 by the teachers, the rest of the bottom five topics are about the same. The huge percentage difference in the ranking of "Motor Sports" highlights the role of gender difference in reading interests. Teachers should take note of this when selecting reading materials for their students.

This mismatch in the ranking of text topics is supported by the findings in Table 4.3.5c. While there are areas of similarity, there are also some significant differences in

reading interests. For example, Science & Technology is ranked 8th by the students but 17th by the teachers. Current Issues is ranked 20th by the students but 12th by the teachers. Here again the difference can be attributed to age, gender and role. Female language teachers in particular are generally not too interested in science and technology, while teachers on the whole are more interested in reading newspapers and keeping in touch with the latest local and world events than in current teen fads or entertainment.

5.2.4 How far do the text topics in the reading section of Form Four KBSM English textbooks reflect the reading interests of students?

An examination of the data in Table 4.4a reveals some very interesting points.

- Entertainment is ranked the most popular reading interest not only by the students but also by the teachers. Yet none of the seven KBSM textbooks (with a combined total of 146 reading sections) have a reading passage based on this reading interest. Although there are 10 adventure stories (ranked 2nd), there are no passages on Sports (ranked 3rd). The total of 7 for Sports in Table 4.4a is rather misleading as the 7 passages are all *descriptions* of the 15th SEA Games held in Kuala Lumpur. Likewise, there are no passages related to Animals, Computer and I.T., Love Stories and Science and Technology. All these interests are popular with students as shown in Tables 4.3.3a(i) and 4.3.3a(ii).
- With all the ten groups (including the teachers' group), Foreign Culture is consistently ranked higher than Local Culture. While this does not mean that passages on local culture should be completely omitted, it does mean that students find it more

interesting to read about foreign culture since they are already familiar with local culture or can read about it in other textbooks such as their Bahasa Malaysia textbooks. Bringing in foreign culture also allows for interesting comparisons and discussions to be made. However, there are no passages related to Foreign Culture in all the KBSM textbooks reviewed in this study.

- On the other hand, there seems to be a heavy concentration on interests such as Moral Values (17%) and Current Issues (16%). Out of a total of 20 reading interests listed, these two interests make up 33% of the topics in the reading section of the seven KBSM textbooks. Yet both interests are considered the least popular by the students! Other interests which were covered by some of the textbooks are Travel, Mysteries, Environment, Good Habits and Health Care. Except for Travel and Mysteries, the other reading interests are not among the top ten choices of the students.

The seven KBSM textbooks are written by former and practising teachers. This lends credence to the research findings that there is a mismatch in teacher-selected topics and student-selected topics. Of course, one can argue that textbook writers are compelled to follow the syllabus and the guidelines for textbook writing issued by the Ministry of Education. But the syllabus does allow some degree of flexibility in the selection of the passages so long as the theme is adhered to. Textbook writers should come up with a more motivating selection of passages for the reading section in their KBSM textbooks.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

In general, the findings show that although most of the students agreed that reading is an important skill, they viewed reading as a boring activity, especially reading from their KBSM English textbooks. They would be more motivated to read if they could choose their own materials. These findings have significant implications on the role of the teacher (and the textbook writer) in selecting and generating reading materials.

- To begin with, there is a need for teachers (and textbook writers) to be more attuned to the reading preferences of students. Other than directly asking them, one way to find out what students like to read is to pick up teen magazines or scan the youth section of the newspapers for ideas on what interests young people these days. “Our choice of materials,” says Thonis (1970:199) “must be based upon as much knowledge of our pupils as we can possibly gather from all sources.”
- As books are no longer the most popular source of reading materials for students, other sources of reading materials should be introduced in the reading class, especially teen magazines, teen novels, quality comics and the Internet. Teachers should allow students greater freedom in choosing what they want to read. Traves (1992) feels that students should not merely be passive consumers of someone’s products or choices. If a text can motivate reading and does not contravene the ban on materials that touch on violence, sex, politics, religion and counter-culture, it is sufficient reason for using it to teach reading.

- There is also a need to break away from adhering too closely to the topics suggested in the reading component of the KBSM syllabus for English Language. The focus, as clearly stated in the syllabus, is on reading skills, not content. For example, to teach the reading skills that are required to understand a description of a process, any text that describes a process can be used. There is no necessity to use a text on the recycling of material as suggested in the syllabus, and which is featured in every one of the seven Form 4 KBSM textbooks reviewed. Furthermore, since Entertainment is a firm favourite with students and with books no longer enjoying its traditional top spot in sources of reading materials, reading a movie review would probably be more stimulating to most students than reading a book review of a literary classic. What the Compendium (1991) recommends is a sufficiently varied range of contents to take into account the different needs and interests of students. A more creative and liberal interpretation of the syllabus would surely result in more interesting texts to teach reading. And if the texts are motivating, they will help to generate a love for reading.
- There should be less emphasis on teaching reading for examination purposes. The common practice is for students to read a text, look up the meaning of new words and then answer comprehension questions based on the text. As shown in the findings, the most important reason why students learn English is to have better job opportunities. It is for the same reason that they consider the listening and speaking skills more important to them than the reading skill. It follows then that teachers (and textbook writers) can introduce texts that focus on more stimulating and teen-related issues and that can generate discussion and an exchange of views among the students like teenage dating, the pros and cons of following fads, and peer pressure. In the syllabus, the topics suggested for reading and understanding current issues are unemployment,

consumerism and health care. These three topics are featured in all the KBSM textbooks. They are not topics that most teenage students can relate to nor are they topics that most students can confidently have a discussion on.

- The findings also show the popularity of reading interests such as Science & Technology and Computer & Information Technology especially with students in the science stream. In addition, the students in the study cited the Internet as their second most popular source of reading materials. What this translates into is an urgent need for teachers to be equipped not only with information on these reading interests, but also to be computer-literate and familiar with using the Internet as a teaching aid as well as a rich source of reading materials. Dubin (1988) suggests that in our technologically changing environment and media-focused world, teachers should be conversant with all the channels through which language flows or lose credibility in the eyes of their learners. Meek (1992) believes that young learners will become sophisticated users of all new technologies more quickly than their elders. Marum (1995) calls for a new generation of teachers who are multi-literate in keeping with the multi-media, networked communications world that our learners live in.
- Besides stream, gender is the other factor that has a strong influence on the reading interests of students. According to the findings, girls and boys differ in their choice of reading materials. Since the teaching (and textbook writing) profession is overwhelmingly female-dominated, there is a tendency to overlook the reading interests of the male students. A case in point is the topic “Motor Sports” which was ranked 5th by the boys but 21st by the teachers. Teachers should take into consideration the gender composition of their students when selecting or writing

materials for their reading class. Thonis (1970:198) argues that since boys are “immersed in a world of petticoats and surrounded by women teachers” for most of their school years, teachers should make a strong attempt to offer materials suitable to their male interests.

- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, since both students and teachers share the opinion that the reading passages in their textbooks are boring, it is time that more importance be given to the role of the topic (and content) in motivating students to read. Although this appears to be self-evident, it is not reflected in the KBSM textbooks (Table 4.4a). If teachers are expected to teach reading strategies using the passages in the textbooks, they would be likely to face difficulty in motivating their students and thus, in helping them become good readers. Just as a skillful surgeon cannot perform his best surgery with a dull scalpel, a talented teacher cannot offer the best teaching with dull, inappropriate materials. Block (1991) advocates using DIY materials, that is, materials produced by teachers specifically for their students to compensate for those in the textbooks which are often dated and written for mass consumption.

To take the implication one step further, since textbook writers are bound by the requirements of the syllabus, perhaps it is pertinent to call for a review of the themes and topics specified in the reading component of the KBSM syllabus. Perhaps it is time to consider what students are interested in reading rather than what syllabus designers or educational policy makers *assume* students want to read or *should* read. Nuttall (1996) maintains that the most important criteria in choosing a text is that the text should interest the readers – preferably enthrall and delight them. Of course, she

argues, it is possible to develop reading skills on a text that is boring, but interesting content makes the learner's task far more rewarding.

It is heartening to know that new textbooks will be introduced in secondary schools in 2002 when the revised *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM)* is implemented. According to the Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, the current syllabus and textbooks had to be replaced to be in tune with the changing times. (The Star: June 9 2000) It remains to be seen whether the new syllabus and the new textbooks will address the needs and interests of students.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As this study is an exploratory one and thus limited in scope, it is hoped that future researchers who might want to replicate this study would extend the sampling and instruments used. To start with, the sampling should cover a wider selection of schools, students and teachers. Even better, the sampling should include textbook writers, publishers and in particular syllabus designers. As for the instruments, besides the questionnaires, formal interviews with a representative number of people from each of the above-mentioned groups should be carried out to supplement the findings from the questionnaires.

As has been pointed out, the findings show that ethnicity does affect areas of reading interests as well as topics of interest. However, the study did not focus on ethnicity as a factor that determines reading interest. Future research that replicates this study could incorporate ethnicity. If ethnicity influences the respondents' interest in

reading about their favourite entertainers, it would not be surprising if the same applies to Sports. For example, Malay students might be more interested to read about Sepak Takraw or football, the Chinese table-tennis or basketball, and the Indians hockey or cricket.

This study stops at text topics as an indicator of motivation (or lack of motivation) to read. Perhaps future research could take the study one step further by carrying out a reading assignment based on a selected topic to test out the following hypotheses that

- a) learners are motivated to read when they are allowed to choose their own materials,
- b) reading comprehension is facilitated when the content of the reading text is motivating to the students.

There is a dearth of research on the role of content in reading motivation and comprehension. Most research on reading tends to focus on early reading, reading strategies and reading disabilities. While these are important areas for research, there is a dire need for studies to be conducted on the relationship between textbooks and reading motivation since most teachers rely on textbooks to teach reading.

It is alarming to think that too many students are graduating into society as functional illiterates, not because of an inability to read, but by choice. Having grown up in a technology-enhanced environment, students are more interested in watching movies, videos and TV, listening to CDs, playing computer games and surfing the Internet. In the face of such competition, the task to motivate students to read printed texts becomes even more daunting. The rapidly expanding global technology and the pervasive reach of the mass media make it imperative for teachers, textbook writers and curriculum planners to

change their mind-set. What made for motivating reading a generation or two ago has become boring and irrelevant to secondary school students today. Reading materials should cater to the needs and interests of the students. This should not be seen as a sacrifice of standards and a betrayal of responsibility (Rönnqvist and Sell:1994) but as a compromise. Once students are motivated to read, and the reading habit has taken root, teachers can steer their students towards better reading materials.