Chapter One

1.0 Introduction

It is Malaysia’s vision to be a fully developed nation by the year 2020. Today’s modern society expects school teachers to ensure that all students are given equal opportunity to have a normal education. In all primary schools, teachers are bound to encounter students in their classes who are unable to cope with the schoolwork. Teachers and parents often express alarm that many students are poor in basic or fundamental academic skills, for example, reading.

Language is a system of symbols that has a highly complex form and structure. In normal language development, young children learn that an idea can be expressed by manipulating and combining these linguistic forms. Embedded within the sound, the word, and the sentence, is meaning. Apart from structure and meaning, language also has a purpose: communication. Children first acquire the ability to communicate, which provides a foundation for later acquisition of ideas and structure (Bernstein & Tiegerman, 1993).
1.1 Background of the Study

"Reading is communication through language. It is a multifaceted and complex psychological activity, which opens doors to a storehouse of knowledge and hence, provides boundless opportunities for the individual to improve him or herself. Reading is a tool skill; that is, people use reading to accomplish other things such as learning how to use a computer or bake bread, the order of the planets in our solar system, and so forth. Students who read well have great advantages in studying not only literature, but also social studies, science and even mathematics." (Hallahan, Kauffman & Lloyd, 1996).

To this end, learning to read is one of the most important steps in the development of a child. Consequently, the role played by teachers in teaching children to read cannot be overemphasized.

Teachers also have to deal with slow learners, who are unable to cope with the pace of the other pupils in the class. For the purpose of this study, slow learners are defined as pupils with learning disabilities. All too often, these slow learners fall by the wayside as the rest of the class advances through the syllabus, forcing them to repeat a year or even, in some cases, dropping out of school altogether.

This is where remedial education comes in. Chua T. T. (1978, p34) states, "Remedial education refers to those special educational practices and services designed to meet the needs of children with learning problems in regular schools". With the awareness and attention given to remedial education, the regular classroom teacher is now expected to meet the needs of pupils with learning disabilities in the classroom along with all the other children in the class.
The National Association for Remedial Education, Malaysia (NAREM) was established on December 18, 1976. Its purpose is to instil remedial awareness among primary school teachers and to promote the welfare and education of children with learning disabilities. However, the number of teachers trained in remedial education did not meet the needs of all the primary schools in Malaysia and many schools did not have such a programme (Chua, T. T., 1978, p37). Today, there is still a severe shortage in remedial education services and this has implications for the actual classroom situation. Stretching this factor further, on a narrow basis, there exists a reading problem in schools. Despite over 25 years there is still a long way to go. While problems exist in all curriculum areas, for the purposes of this study I will concentrate on the existing reading problems in special education classes in primary schools.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The nature of the reading problems is complex and varies in degree with the identification of various kinds of deficiencies. Identifying the nature of reading problems is important, as it will determine the type and the frequency of the intervention required. The identification procedure in most cases is through various medical, psychological and reading tests. Students with reading problems have to be identified and the essential remedial help should be provided at the earliest. This study will explore the types of reading problems among pupils in special education classes in schools and the problems faced by their teachers. It will also explore how these teachers identify and deal with such students, including the challenges they face, in terms of facilities and resources, in carrying out their duties.
1.3 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the reading problems among pupils in special education classes in schools from the teachers' perspective. It will focus on the existing practices: how teachers in special education classes identify the common reading problems among pupils with different learning disabilities; what remedial measures are taken to help the pupils; whether the teachers feel the current methods of teaching these pupils are effective; and the problems these teachers face in terms of facilities and resources.

1.4 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the problems faced by teachers, teaching reading to pupils in special education classes in schools?

2. What are the current methods used by these teachers when dealing with reading problems among pupils with learning disabilities?

3. How effective are the current teaching methods used to deal with these pupils?
1.5 Limitations of the Study

Only government primary schools in Kuala Lumpur, which presently have special education classes, were chosen for this study as private institutions have varying facilities, depending on their resources and the type of disabilities they cater to. A questionnaire was sent out to 17 teachers from five schools. However, not all teachers of such classes were keen to give their feedback for fear of offending the school administrators. The small sampling of teachers and the age group of the students with reading problems as well as financial and time constraints limit the scope of this study.

1.6 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that by providing an insight into the problems faced by teachers in special education classes who are trying to teach pupils with reading problems, it will help in formulating more effective methodologies to reach out to these children.