

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Education is seen in Malaysia as an instrument indispensable to economic progress, national unity and social stability (Ministry of Education, 1990). The provision of equal educational opportunity for everyone in this fast developing and pluralistic nation through a common system of education means equal opportunities to develop the intellectual capacity and skill that underlie competence. Therefore, considerable concerted effort and resources are spent on upgrading the quality of education in all areas and at all levels.

In striving to improve education at school level, a major curriculum innovation, the New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR), was implemented nationwide in 1983. This new curriculum places emphasis on the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical development of learners as well as the learning of the 3 Rs, i.e. Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (Ministry of Education, 1980). The subsequent Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM) mirrors this emphasis. Twenty years after the realization of KBSR, innovations are still very much a part of the educational scenario here in Malaysia, such as the implementation of English as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science in 2003.

1.2 The English Language Curriculum

English is taught as a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. In line with its status as a second language, English is taught so

as to *enable school-leavers to use English in every day situations and work situations as well as to pursue higher education in the medium of English* (Ministry of Education, 2000). The revision of the KBSM in 2000 echoes current developments in education and the emphasis on the acquisition of skills such as thinking and learning how to learn, information and communication technology (ICT) and knowledge acquisition. The paucity of academic material in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, at higher levels of education makes it necessary to access information in English for academic success. English is regarded by many as a library language. However, with Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in schools and universities, the level of English proficiency among Malaysians has dropped to an alarming level and this awareness has impelled measures to arrest the decline such as the reintroduction of English as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science. As renowned academic Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Awang Had Salleh puts it, *English is a major vehicle through which knowledge and information are transmitted* (The Star, 27 April 2003).

The core of the English Language curriculum for schools comprises the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing that learners require to interact with people, to obtain information and present information, to respond to literary texts and to express themselves creatively (Ministry of Education, 1980). In striving to achieve these objectives, the significance of being able to read cannot be denied. The ability to read effectively and efficiently to access the wealth of information that is available in libraries and resource centers, in print as well as via the electronic media, is vital at higher levels of education. In a nutshell, reading is

perhaps the most important skill for second language learners in academic contexts for a lack of reading proficiency will prevent these learners from performing at levels they must in order to succeed (Grabe, 1991). Through the English Language curriculum, learners should be able to develop and foster the necessary skills to become skillful and efficient readers of English.

1.3 Reading

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1985:238) defines reading as *perceiving a written text in order to understand its contents and the understanding that results is called reading comprehension*. It is a skill that one needs to be taught unlike listening or speaking which one acquires naturally unless physically or mentally impaired. Reading is perceived by many in the field of language teaching and learning as one of the most important skills in a language.

The complex nature of reading makes learning to read a slow and difficult endeavor. Some learners never get past the early stages. For them, learning to read is laborious and a seemingly impossible task. Then again, there are learners who just seem to acquire the ability to read effortlessly. Despite these very encouraging cases, it is indisputable that learning to read requires time, effort and above all, practice. Nuttal's (1982) depiction of the virtuous circle of a good reader aptly captures the essence of reading: the more one reads, the more one will be able to learn; the more one is able to learn, the more one will enjoy reading; the more one enjoys reading, the faster one will be able to read; the faster one is able to read, the more one will be able to learn. The Malaysian Ministry of Education emphasizes the importance and

usefulness of being able to read. Reading programmes such as the Class Reader Programme and the Extensive Reading Programme have been implemented to inculcate a reading habit among Malaysian learners.

1.4 Reading Comprehension

As mentioned above, the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1985:238) defines reading comprehension as the understanding that results from reading. Grellet (1981:3), on the other hand, states that *understanding a text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible*. Perhaps the most concise explanation is from Johnston:

Reading comprehension is considered to be a complex behavior which involves conscious and unconscious use of various strategies, including problem-solving strategies, to build a model of the meaning which the writer is assumed to have intended. This model is constructed using schematic knowledge structures and the various cue systems which the writer has given.....to generate hypotheses which are tested using various logical and pragmatic strategies.

(Johnston, 1983:17)

As comprehension is an internal and complex process that occurs in the reader's mind, it is not subject to external observation. Hence, reading comprehension is generally viewed as a process of getting meaning from something read. To gauge a learner's understanding of a text, reading comprehension tests are commonly used in schools.

1.5 Reading Comprehension Tests

We are all familiar with the usual format of reading comprehension tests: short passages followed by multiple-choice or open-ended questions. Learners'

scores in these reading comprehension tests are generally considered measurements of their understanding of what they have read where the production of a correct answer should depend on information obtained from the reading passage. However, these tests provide little insight into the comprehension processes that the test-taker undergoes. It does not reveal how the text information was processed as a whole or how it was related to the reader's general fund of knowledge (Smith & Jackson, 1985). It is possible that the test-taker utilized his or her general knowledge, knowledge of multiple-choice tests, clues given in preceding questions and syntactic or semantic relationships between a question stem and its answer choices, to arrive at the correct answer (Connor and Read, 1978). With a probability of 1 out of 4, guessing the correct answer may not be too far-fetched either. Consequently, there is doubt as to whether these reading comprehension tests measure learners' comprehension alone. According to Johnston (1983), in order to make a meaningful interpretation of a learner's reading comprehension, it is necessary to understand the influence of the characteristics of the text, the nature of the task, the context and the learner's reading abilities and general knowledge.

One measure for the assessment of reading comprehension recommended by Bernhardt (1991) is the immediate recall. She claims that this method of assessment does not influence a reader's understanding of a text but instead shows where a lack of grammar interferes with comprehension, and provides a purer measure of comprehension that is uncomplicated by linguistic and tester interference. Johnston (1983:54) considers this *the most straightforward assessment of the result of the text-*

reader interaction. This study concerns such a method of reading comprehension assessment.

1.6 Statement of Problem

Many language teachers who are entrusted with the task of teaching reading consider the skill of reading aloud and production of correct answers or responses as being more important than the process of reading (Cheah & Raj, 1992). When a written text is employed, it is usually used as a vehicle to introduce new vocabulary or new structures. As a result, there are few deliberate and purposeful attempts made to study and subsequently aid the acquisition and mastery of the sub-skills of reading.

One of the contributing factors to this problem of students' lack of reading skills is that a considerable number of English language teachers in secondary schools, especially those that are in rural areas, have no formal qualification to teach English as a second or a foreign language (Raj & Hunt, 1990). Indeed, the only English language qualification these teachers possess is probably a credit in English at SPM level or that they had completed their tertiary education in a western country. The most pathetic selection criterion that has become a joke among English language teachers in some rural areas where the dearth of trained TESL teachers is most pronounced is "if you can speak and understand English, you can teach the language".

Teachers' and their learners' unduly great concern and preoccupation with public examinations like the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) that students sit for

at the end of Form Three, further compound the problem as the focus of teaching and learning English is in the preparation of learners to sit for the examinations.

This obvious mismatch between curriculum expectations and the rendition of these expectations into classroom practice is perhaps due to the teachers' lack of understanding of the purpose of teaching reading. According to Nuttal (1982:31), "*In a reading lesson, we are not setting out to teach language, alternatively if we are setting out to teach language, we are not giving a reading lesson*". Therefore, it is essential that teachers comprehend that the purpose of teaching reading in English as a second language is to enable their learners to utilize the acquired skills and ability to read in order to learn from what they read.

1.7 Purpose of the Study

This research report concerns a group of learners, who are from rural areas, and the ways in which they cope with the difficulties in reading in English by examining how they deal with reading comprehension tests and the reconstruction of a reading text through the use of an immediate recall task. The written protocols produced will be used as a parallel measure of the learners' understanding of what they read.

This interest stems from the fact that reading comprehension tests are very much a part of English Language assessment in schools as well as in public examinations. The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the reading problems these learners face and the strategies they utilize to overcome the difficulties in comprehending and interpreting the texts they read.

1.8 Research Questions

The study focuses on the reading skills that the learners may have acquired from their first language and from English language instruction and whether they utilize these skills in dealing with reading comprehension tests in English. It is anticipated that there will be a difference in the reading comprehension performance of the students when they are required to recall immediately what they have read as compared to when they respond to the traditional reading comprehension tests. This study runs along the following lines of enquiry:

1. Do learners' scores in reading comprehension tests reflect their actual comprehension?
2. What difficulties do second language learners face in reading comprehension tests?
3. What strategies do learners use to overcome difficulties in constructing meaning from the texts they read?

1.9 Significance of the Study

As Malaysia rapidly develops, the importance of education is unquestionable. Tertiary education is slowly becoming a necessity rather than a privilege. To succeed at higher levels of education, students need to be able to read effectively and efficiently in English in order to extract information from texts. Nevertheless, the route to becoming a skillful reader is a long one. Reading skills need to be taught and learnt. Learners comprehension and interpretation of the texts they read are influenced by various factors. Teachers need to understand these factors before they can help their learners make sense of what they read. Hence, insights from this study

will enable teachers to bring to bear the appropriate instructions in their approaches to teaching reading in order to improve and enhance their students' learning.

1.10 Limitations of the Study

I would like to stress that this study is conducted in one English Language classroom. The findings may point favourably to the idea of using immediate recalls to assess reading comprehension. Nonetheless, the findings are only representative of the particular class of learners. In no way, do the findings represent the whole population of students in Malaysia. Additional research is required for any findings of this study to be applicable nationwide.