

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I shall discuss the findings of the study, which was conducted in the context of an ESL class in a rural school, and share some of the insights gained. The discussion will also cover some of the implications arising as a result of this study which will have bearing on our teaching principles to ensure the effectiveness of reading lessons.

5.2 Main Concerns of the Study

This study was an enquiry into the nature of reading comprehension among a group of Form Three students. It investigated whether the reading comprehension test scores obtained by these students do in fact reflect their understanding of what they read. It also looked at the reading difficulties they faced during reading and how they surmounted them. Data was obtained by using 2 sets of reading comprehension tests and a recall task. Information was also gleaned from questionnaires and interviews with key informants.

5.3 Insights from the Reading Comprehension Tests

The 2 sets of reading comprehension tests used in this study comprised 18 texts with 4 to 7 multiple-choice questions each, totaling 100 questions. The students were required to complete these two tests in two 90-minute sessions. From my

observations of the students taking the tests, I found that some students completed the test in less than an hour but some students could not complete within the stipulated period. These students marked their answers without first reading the text. After the two sessions, I had a discussion with the class to talk about their test-taking experience. Most of the questions they asked pertained to the meanings of words, phrases and sentences. But when asked if they could answer the questions, the students responded that they could, because there were options provided. Perhaps these are aspects that have to be taken into consideration when we use the multiple-choice format to measure reading comprehension.

5.4 Insights from the Recall Task

This study utilized an immediate recall task to measure the students' comprehension of the text they read. When the scores obtained in this task were compared with the reading comprehension test scores, it was found that there were no extreme variations. The high achievers in the tests obtained high scores in the recall task. The students who achieved low scores in the tests did not do too well in the recall task either. These findings indicate that the immediate recall task can be an alternative method of testing reading comprehension to complement the commonly used multiple-choice, cloze or open-ended questions.

The findings also show that even though most of the students claimed to have problems recalling the sequence, none of the students produced a chronologically deviant recall. Even the recalls with low scores followed the sequence of happenings in the text. As the key informants revealed, when they could not recall parts of the

text, they made it up. As S2 put it, "I make up my own sentence and try to match it. If the story is like the one in the recall task, it is similar to the ones often used in English reading comprehension questions. If it's about fires, then you know the people returning from their kampung would certainly feel sad and be thankful to the person." Some students made additions in their recalls for elaboration. Though these additions were not scored, they were appropriate in the context they appeared in.

To be able to *make up* the unrecalled parts and to *add on* information, they had to have the knowledge of what usually happens in a story, i.e. a story schema. Therefore, these students had consciously or unconsciously utilized their schematic knowledge to complete the task. S18, the top achiever for both the reading comprehension tests and the recall task, was an exception. She stated that she memorized the parts she did not understand. Obviously, her working memory capacity enabled her to successfully complete the recall task because a large portion of her written protocol was recalled verbatim.

The analysis of the recalls shows that the students used strategies such as substitutions with synonyms and paraphrasing. There were also some students who wrote some words and phrases in their native language, Bahasa Melayu, despite the fact that they were given instructions to write their recall in English. However, on inspection, the meaning of the words and phrases recalled in Bahasa Melayu were correct and appropriately positioned. Some examples of these instances are: '*mengulang kaji pelajaran for trial examination*' (I revise for trial examination), '*After I give a butir kejadian to the operator*' (After I give details of the happening to the operator), and '*But something out there was menarik minat I*' (But something out

there got my attention). Influence of the native language was also evident in the construction of certain sentences in some recalls. For example, *'The fire 'was outcontrol'* and *'He was so shocked for what had happen'*. These examples show the students' understanding of the text but their inadequate semantic and syntactic skills and memory capacities limited the accuracy of their recall.

5.5 Insights from the Questionnaires

Questionnaire I provided information on the students' English language background and their use of English in communication. Most of the students started learning the language in kindergarten, as is the norm nowadays. However, they use English to communicate mostly within the school environment, with their friends and with their teachers.

In addition, these students did not seem to do much reading in English. As English was their second language, many of the students found reading in English daunting. Most of them read in English only when they had to and this was often because a reading task was assigned to them by their English teacher and they had language exercises to complete. Their criteria for choice of reading material (topic) and the types of material they preferred, were perhaps too restricted.

Despite possessing positive attitudes towards learning English, these students did not seem to be motivated to read, thereby not attaining the virtuous circle of a good reader depicted by Nuttal (1982). One probable reason for this may be that a wide range of reading materials that might interest them was not available and their main source of reading materials, the school library, which was relatively new, was

not well equipped to meet their needs. A combination of these factors probably contributed to the students' problems in their efforts to acquire the language.

5.6 Insights from the Structured Interview

This study investigated the reading problems of a group of ESL students and how they surmounted these problems in order to make sense of their reading. The findings from the questionnaires as well as the interviews demonstrate the students' difficulty with vocabulary and their concern about the meanings of individual words rather than the meaning of the whole text. One student even claimed to have a dictionary at hand before she began reading. This preoccupation with the meaning of words inhibited their flow of reading and subsequently affected their comprehension of the text.

Besides semantics, these students also faced difficulties with the syntax of English. Though they appeared to be aware of its importance, they did not seem to make use of their grammatical knowledge to help them comprehend better.

5.7 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study may be used to provide insights into more effective testing methods of reading comprehension with implications for practice. Firstly, these findings suggest the use of the immediate recall task as a complementary measure of reading comprehension with other commonly used tests. The findings also point to the usefulness of this form of testing reading comprehension in helping practicing teachers to identify and understand their students' reading problems.

5.8 Suggestions for Further Research

The above findings and pedagogical suggestions cannot be tendered without disclaimers. First, the study only involved 30 students of one Form Three class. It did not involve the other students in the school for a wider perspective of the reading problems they encounter. Second, it was not possible to interview all 30 students for more information on their use of reading strategies. Clearly, further analysis examining the use of such strategies by students of various levels of proficiency across various ESL populations would reveal further insights to support or contradict the findings of this study. Third, the students were required to recall in English, the target language. Recalls in the native language may reveal other insights into students' reading difficulties.

5.9 Conclusion

Although the study presented here is limited to a particular context, the results would seem to be compatible with the assessment of reading in many second language classrooms where the primary concern of teachers and the students is comprehension. Difficulties arise along the road to success in reading but these problems are not insurmountable. The teachers' legitimate interest in helping their students and the students' desire to be helped will pave the way. Therefore, teachers need to have a clear perception of what constitutes reading, the processes involved, how reading can be assessed, why difficulties surface and what to do when reading is not successful.

Undoubtedly, greater understanding and knowledge of classroom studies of this nature will be useful to corroborate the findings of this small-scale study. The findings will have greater implications for teacher training and development.