CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of Reading

There is increasing awareness in the world that reading is of fundamental importance in the life of the individual citizens. Almost everywhere we turn, we can find books, articles and research reports on issues related to reading and reading problems. Many studies have been undertaken focusing on the various aspects of reading, including reader’s characteristics, interests and habits. Singapore has undertaken studies which examine trends in literacy according to sex, age, ethnic group and languages (Tay, 1983).

In the Sri Lankan context, there have been a number of studies in strengthening the present educational system. ‘Achieving excellence, providing equity and equality through a modernized system of education that will create a generation of human citizens, equipped to face the challenges of the 21st century and presentations, promotion and propagation of culture of Sri Lanka’ (The New Vistas in Education, 2002). According to this mission statement, new programs, new curricular and new educational facilities are being offered. Despite these improvements in education both qualitatively and quantitatively, most students seem to read only for examination purposes. They do very little supplementary reading or engage in reading for pleasure. Unfortunately, little is known about the reading habits and interest of Sri Lankan students. However, educators generally agree that as a nation, Sri Lanka does not fully realize the importance of reading.
In recent years, there is concern, that there is no serious attempt to develop the reading habits of children. Clearly there is a need for research studies in this area so that a more accurate picture can be obtained. It is necessary to focus attention on creating a new awareness in reading, particularly considering the addiction to television and computers, especially among the younger generation in Sri Lanka.

1.2 Importance of Reading

Reading is one of the most important components of our language and it is an essential tool for life long learning for children. In order to face the 21st century, education has to prepare children to be able to adapt to social and technological changes that are taking place at an unprecedented rate. Education under these circumstances depends largely on language competency. In this context, reading especially is a resource for continued education, for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, for gaining information through media, especially newspapers, books, radio, television, and the computers. Thus, it is evident that reading and information skills need to be improved to attain the best education (Narangoda, 2000).

Reading helps an individual to learn all the other areas of the school curriculum and provides a vital means for learning. It is a process of acquiring information by receiving a message from print in a meaningful way. Some view reading as a complex process, integrating all aspects of human behavior and demanding varied and continued instructional guidance to read accurately, to appraise what is read and to relate, what is read in a significant way to other areas of life. Reading is a key to a wealth of experience
that links people in a way far beyond distance or time. According to Green (2002), ‘reading provides experience through to the individual so that he may expand his horizons, identify, extend and intensify his interest and gain deeper understanding of himself and other human being and of the world’. Thus, reading is a social phenomenon an educative influence, which should be a major interest and concern to parents, sociologists, and educationists.

A good reading habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth. Children normally use sensory perceptions to know their immediate surroundings and widen their vision, through reading. Reading is a habit, which is not a one time experience. It is accepted that a good reading habit has to be cultivated and natured in the early years of life (Wijesuriya, 1995). The reading habit, therefore, plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve practical efficiency. According to Scott (2002), books, yield their best to you when you read them at the age at which, each particular masterpiece can ideally be chewed and digested.

One of the reasons for the decline of the reading habit and interest has been attributed to the failure of educational instructions in schools to cultivate permanent interest in students to read. Wagner (2002) stated that reading is a only language skill but also a means of educating and developing an individual and society. Yet, there are many people today both within and outside the formal educational environment, who have not made progress in this valuable skill, despite the wealth of reading materials and endless efforts by teachers to promote activities in this area.
The reading habit refers to the amount of the different kinds of reading materials read by an individual, the frequency of reading, and the average time spent on reading materials. Cleary (1972) stated that an individual's interests is determined to a considerable extent by the amount he will read and the intensity with which he will pursue his reading activity. By reading books, one gets confirmation or rejection of one's own ideas, which makes one think more critically about right and wrong in the society (Bergland, 1998). Reading provides people with a sense of values, which enable them gradually to develop the greatest of all virtues, that is the ability to understand rather than condemn. Books can also be very comforting, especially at times when one doubts one's self and one's beliefs (Cook, 1998).

Fiction, on the other hand provides a pleasurable reading experience, as well as gives much wider information than is covered by the curriculum. It also provides a background for studying one's own country and other countries, as well as a means of helping children understand themselves, their friends and their world. Fiction can act as an active conformation at times (Kinnell, 1980).

1.3 Reading and Literacy

The civilization of mankind today demands that one should not only know how to read and be literate, but one should also be functionally literate. Rycik (2002) indicates that a person who has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing will enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his
culture or groups. Generally, a person can be assumed to have acquired functional literacy when he has had the equivalent of about 5 years of schooling.

Studies by Buckingham (2002) on reading and literacy competencies in secondary schools in Manchester attempts to see how the promotion of reading and literacy in schools can develop pupil’s reading habits for both recreational and educational purposes. It illustrates the role of teaching staff, parents and libraries in promoting reading and literacy to pupils. This study indicates that promotional activities can be engaged to encourage the development of literacy skills in an informal and leisurely manner.

In addressing the literacy need, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency is not enough. Young students also need motivation to participate in the process of reading. The motivation is achieved when the environment is physiologically and academically safe, when choices are provided and when clear achievable goals are present. Unsuccessful students must be assured that they are in a supportive environment to develop literacy skills. Their self concept as learners is intertwined with their perceived ability to comprehend the printed words. The goal is to build fluency and confidence as independent readers. This could enable them to have the ability to read and improve as they leave the institution and become life long learners.

To avoid alienation and stress for adolescent readers and to reconcile apparently contradictory goals and methods, educators need to consider and apply well established understandings of literacy development. Fong (1997) asserted that teachers should
consider students' stages of development and select suitable materials, so that readers could move through a range of stages depending on the subject matter, interest and individual reading ability and habits.

1.4 Opportunities for Reading.

A teacher's attitude is a very significant feature in improving a student's love for reading. Wherever possible, opportunities should be given to read for enjoyment in the classroom. This would provide each pupil an excellent opportunity to exploit his need to improve his reading skills (Jon, 1998).

Parents should encourage their children to read intelligently and promote the reading habits. Interest in reading is not developed in a vacuum but closely founded on personal interests (Dearing, 1998). The parents of all children should provide an environment for the fostering of healthy reading habits. Reading should be as natural to a child as the activity such as watching television or using computers. It is important that the parents who are keen to foster the reading habit among their children should themselves know something about books and authors.

Reading becomes a habit when we love to read, and read when we have the free time. Sukun (2001) stated that what we read and how we read determines the quality of our reading skills. Only through quality reading we can achieve the purpose of reading, which is the better of our intelligence and spirit. Reading also involves having the skill to
process information. The reading habits start at home and in the school. According to Sukun, reading is not an inborn skill. It has to be learned and cultivated from childhood.

1.4.1 Feelings and attitudes towards Reading

Students need to develop a positive attitude towards reading to motivate them to read more challenging material. Older reluctant or struggling readers generally have a negative attitude towards reading, read less frequently, and consequently fall further behind their peers (Burns, 2002). Feelings are often referred to as the affective component of an attitude and it refers to emotions connected with object and may be liked or disliked. If an individual holds a positive attitude towards reading, it is presumed that he will read much and if he holds a negative attitude, he will read less or never read at all.

1.4.2 The School library

The school library is generally well organized, and stocked with a reasonable range of carefully selected books and other reading materials. In schools, students are encouraged to explore the library facilities, pursue their own interests and read widely. They could further resort to the school library for their reading materials in order to meet their reading needs and subsequently develop a habit of reading. Libraries and reading are fundamental to learning (Heny, 2002). They can provide the instruction and the technology to prepare students for a love of reading, life long learning, informed decision-making and the use of information technology.
1.5 Problem Statements

Since independence in 1948, the government of Sri Lanka has made education one of its highest priorities and policy that has yielded excellent results in the last 50 years. Through its laissez faire social policies and strategies, the number of schools has increased over 50%, the number of students 400%, and the number of teachers increased more than 300% This growth had been especially rapid in secondary schools. In 1996/1997, Sri Lanka had a student population of 4.1 million who were enrolled in primary and secondary schools. Teachers made up the largest government work force outside the plantation industry and the country has achieved a high literacy rate of 91.8% as a whole and 94.3% in respect of males and 91.8% in relation to female population. (SCHOOL CENSUS 1998, Ministry of Education Sri Lanka).

In Sri Lanka, the National Library and Documentation Service Board (NLDB) is one of the institutions which is committed to develop reading habits among school children in Sri Lanka. The NLDB survey (2002) has shown that reading habits of the students appear to be poor. The school libraries are in a poor condition, books are old and in bad condition and not inviting enough to stimulate reading. Reading habits and interests are operationally stated in terms of the frequency of reading different type of materials (Such as magazines, novels, comic books and newspapers).

Gunasekara (2002) studied reading problems in secondary schools in Sri Lanka and found that there are three major factors that hinder the promotion of reading habits of students. Firstly, students prefer to listen and chat to reading. Secondly, reading resources
are inaccessible due to insufficient school libraries. Thirdly, lure of electronic media, such as television has an effect on reading performance and has become an issue of growing concern as regard the decline in reading. Furthermore, the reading done by students seems to be limited to examination purposes and there is a lack of supplementary reading materials and reading for pleasure and knowledge. Considering the importance of reading as an essential tool for lifelong learning, it is essential to identify the ways of improving reading habits and interests among students in Sri Lanka.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

This is an exploratory study to investigate the reading habits and interests among secondary school students in Sri Lanka. The objectives are:

(1) To identify reading interests and habits of secondary school pupils in selected schools in Sri Lanka.

(2) To examine the environmental factors related to the home and school background, and the way they influence children’s reading interests.

(3) To identify the impact of gender and subject streams on reading habits.

1.7 Research Questions

The following research questions are used to develop this study:

(1) What do secondary school pupils read for leisure?

(2) How regularly do pupils read during their leisure time?

(3) What are the pupils’ purposes and for reading?

(4) What are the pupils’ personal feelings towards reading as an activity?
(5) What are the problems perceived by students which hinder their reading for leisure?

(6) What is the relationship between reading interests and habits compared to students educational and demographic background?

(7) Where do the pupils obtain their reading materials?

1.8 Significance of Study

This study aims to gather and analyze relevant data which will provide the necessary information, so that a description of the reading activity of students in secondary schools can be obtained and inferences on the readership pattern between variables concerning the habits of reading can be made. This study examines factors related to reading habits and interests among secondary school students in Sri Lanka. It also investigates the extent of the relationship between those factors and students' reading habits and interests. The significance of this study lies in its collection of empirical evidence regarding the actual reading habits and interests among secondary school students who are in the Arts and Science streams.

The school is the center in promoting reading habits and the teacher is the key factor who investigates all activities of student learning. Usually students are more willing to read materials that interest them and for this reason teachers and librarians, could play a significant role in promoting reading habits among students. It is hoped that this study will create an awareness among teachers on the individual needs of students of diverse background, varied habits, interests, attitudes, and motivation towards reading. Teachers
need to be aware of students’ reading attitude when planning instruction and careful planning can help learners develop a positive attitude towards reading.

1.9 Limitation of the study

The study is confined to the analysis of reading habits and interests among secondary school students in selected schools in Sri Lanka. However the study has the following limitations:

(a) The sample for this study consists of 300 boys and girls, who come from 10 secondary schools in the Western province, Education Department in Sri Lanka.

(b) It includes the students of Grade 12 and 13 consider only those students between the ages of 16 and 17 and who categories under the Art and Science streams.

(c) A sample survey will be carried out to gather data and other necessary information through the use of a structured questionnaire. Additional information will be collected from published sources.

1.10 Summary

This chapter serves as an introduction to the study. It provides an overview of leisure reading habits and interests among secondary school students in Sri Lanka. The importance of reading, reading and literacy, the opportunities of reading, feelings and attitudes towards reading are discussed. This chapter also presents the problems and importance of the study, the objectives of the study, the research questions, the significance and limitations of the study.