

## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Malaysia being a multiracial country is made up of citizens from various cultural and traditional backgrounds. The three main races in Malaysia are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. There are also several ethnic minority groups living in Malaysia. Each ethnic race speaks their L1 (native language). However until the late 1960's, English Language was the medium of instruction in all schools in Malaysia after which the Government of the day initiated a change in the educational policy which declared that Bahasa Malaysia would gradually become the medium of instruction in all primary and secondary schools. Realising the importance of the English Language as a global language, the Malaysian Government considers it equally important and regards English as a second language to be taught in Malaysia.

### **1.2 Background to the study**

The teaching of reading both in Bahasa Malaysia (the National/Official Language) and in English has been one of the skills religiously taught by language teachers in Malaysian schools. Reading is regarded as one of the skills to gauge the students' ability in the language. The teaching of reading is seen as one of the sub components that exist in the English language class at all levels, in primary and secondary schools. In the National type primary schools reading is taught in two languages that are in Bahasa Malaysia and in the English Language.

In Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools, pupils are taught reading in their L1 followed by Bahasa Malaysia. In these vernacular schools, English is only taught in Primary Three. All students continue to learn the English Language right until the fifth Form. Reading in the class is mainly confined to their textbooks and other

predetermined literature books. The syllabus implemented in Secondary schools is the communicative syllabus, which is basically aimed at equipping pupils with language competence to use in daily conversation only. In the yearly final examinations, it is not a requirement to obtain a pass in English to move on to the next form.

Malaysia is a country where the population is unevenly distributed due to the nature of the occupations in which their parents are involved. In Malaysia the densely populated areas which are predominantly in the cities and urban areas are well developed with the most modern facilities and services. Hence students from cities and urban areas which are well developed possess different schematic knowledge. This difference in schematic knowledge could be gained through their experiences and opportunities to read extensively, exposure to the various media such as the television, radio and the Internet. Numerous libraries and public institutions of higher learning provide reading materials for students to read and widen their schema as compared to students from the rural areas. These students from the urban areas would probably understand the reading text differently, as compared to students from the rural areas.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

The distribution of the Malaysian population is spread over a large geographical area. The working population is involved in a diversity of economic activities. This diversity of employment could have a direct bearing on the socio economic status (SES) of a family. The SES of a family appears to influence the reading habits and this may thus have an effect on the students' schematic knowledge when attempting to read a reading text. Therefore students from various geographical locations such as the rural areas, villages, towns and cities would be exposed to

different kinds of environment, which would influence their schematic knowledge. This exposure would enrich the students' schema and hence, when they read a text related to their own schematic knowledge they are able to understand the content of the text better. Therefore this disparity in the locality of students appear to have a significant effect on the students skills of identifying meaning and interpreting the content of the reading text.

As stated in the earlier part of this chapter, students in Malaysian schools possess differing levels of background knowledge. Apart from their background knowledge, their linguistic knowledge (vocabulary) also varies and hence the students encounter difficulties in understanding the text they are reading. Many students from rural schools have inadequate schema to accurately interpret the words and content of the reading text. One of the factors that could contribute to this problem of students possessing poor background knowledge regarding the content of the reading text could be attributed to their L1 (mother tongue). Many students come from vernacular primary schools where the usage of their L1 is predominant. These students would also converse in their mother tongue at home. Due to this extensive use of their L1, both, in school and at home, there appears to be some difficulties for students to develop direct translation of words to their L1 to understand the text, when reading in the English Language. Another factor that heightens this problem is the low proficiency levels of the rural students, the majority of whom come from vernacular or national type primary school where exposure to the English Language is limited to the English lesson in class only. Therefore, development of their proficiency in the target language is severely hampered

The extensive use of Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction in all schools in Malaysia is regarded as one of the reasons for the decline in the standard of

the English Language. Apart from the decline in the standard of the English Language poor reading habits also curtails the development of the students' schematic knowledge. Without adequate schematic knowledge the reader would find it difficult to understand what is being read. Many students in the rural areas of Malaysia have very little command of the adequate vocabulary needed to understand the meaning of the reading text of most topics in their textbook. Due to this lack of exposure to the English Language and student's lack of adequate schemata to rekindle their prior knowledge, students from the rural areas will definitely have difficulties in understanding reading text.

Malaysia has a multi racial and multi ethnic population, hence the students should be made aware of the different culture that exists in our country. All students may not understand many culture specific reading text. This barrier in understanding reading text, which is related to a specific culture, may pose difficulties to the reader because they are not exposed to the culture depicted in the text. However there may exist a situation where readers' interest in a particular culture, which may not be his/her own culture, will enable the reader to understand the text due to the reader's interest and probably the reader has prior knowledge about the content of the text. Therefore, interest appears to play a role in understanding reading text specific to a particular culture even if the culture is not that of the readers'. Teachers tend to select reading text which is culturally bias, i.e. specifically focussing on a culture existing in Malaysia. This may cause problems in understanding the text amongst readers who are not familiar with the culture specific content portrayed in the reading text. Thus, the language teacher can play a vital role in helping students to be exposed to other cultures prevalent in Malaysia when conducting the reading lesson.

A survey (with a sample population of 15,054) conducted by academics from a range of Malaysian universities, revealed that Malaysians spend a mean monthly expenditure of RM 10.00 on books and magazines Raj & Hunt (1990), Long et al: (1994). The survey further reported that while 42% of the subjects said that they had read books in the past six months, only half of them were able to supply the title of the books they read. The results of this survey raised serious concerns so much so that the year 1988 was officially designated "Reading Year" by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education also organised public events to promote the reading culture. The initial stages of the "Reading Year" generated great interest and enthusiasm among the people. The National Book Council organised numerous book fairs and exhibitions all over the country for the general public, with the hope that the reading habit would be inculcated in the general public. A wide variety of magazines and books were also introduced for sale at discounted prices. Other private bodies and well-known book distributors also carried out direct sales, selling books at bargain prices.

However there apparently does not appear to be much change in reading habits, which could have a positive effect on the schematic knowledge of the reader. In a survey conducted by Dr. P. Ambigapathy (Star Newspaper: Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1997), a lecturer at the Malaysian Science University, and presented at the International Conference on Literacy. The results of the survey apparently showed 80% of matriculation students (17 years old) in local universities are reluctant to read in English. The findings further reveal that 79% of the students spend less than an hour a week reading in English for pleasure while 88% of them spend less than four hours a week reading either in English or Bahasa Malaysia. The findings also reveal

that less than 10% of the subjects spend more than four hours a week reading English and Malay magazines.

Due to the severe deficiency in the students reading habits, the reader does not possess adequate word knowledge (vocabulary) that can help in understanding the content of the text. This lack of adequate word knowledge in the student creates a mismatch between the information received from the printed page and information stored in the students' schema, which could help in the understanding of the text. The difficulty that arises in the student's inability to understand the reading text would further discourage the student from reading. Hence a vicious cycle is created whereby the fear of reading due to being unable to understand the text further stagnates the development of the students' schema.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that may cause some difficulties faced by Form Four students in reading text-depicting content relevant to a specific culture. The outcome of this study would shed some light as to why students find it difficult to understand the content of reading texts. The purpose of this study is also to determine the role of cultural knowledge in helping to understand reading texts a Form class. The problem of inadequate prior knowledge could also be related to many factors. A few such factors could be students' cultural knowledge of the content of the text, word knowledge which could be influenced by socio-economic status (SES) of families, the reading environment at home, the availability of reading material and parental role in helping pupils to cultivate the reading habit. Hence this study will attempt to establish the connection between students' reading habits and the possible influence it may have on the development of their cultural knowledge. This

study will also establish the role of prior knowledge upon the students' ability in understanding the reading text.

### **1.5 Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to gather information from the subjects, in this case 16 Form Four students, in a rural secondary school and to identify the difficulties they face in understanding the cultural content of reading texts. The reading comprehension texts found in their textbook may focus on a particular culture which could be unfamiliar to some students. The text books also contains texts which have vocabulary and cultural content that appear to relate better to the schematic knowledge of the more proficient reader. This study would also attempt to establish the role of content knowledge (cultural) in helping them to understand two reading text.

Students in rural schools appear to have some difficulty in understanding meaning from the reading text due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge in understanding the reading text. New understandings of schema theory puts forth the notion that during the reading process, the reader actively constructs meaning from the text not only through the words that is read but also through translation into their mother tongue and using contextual clues to identify meaning. Students using these methods of deriving meaning may distort the intended meaning conveyed in the text. This study would also attempt to give an indication of the relevance of prior knowledge in helping the reader to understand reading texts.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

1. Does cultural familiarity help in the understanding of reading texts?
2. Does prior knowledge play an important role in the understanding of reading texts?
3. Do reading habits influence the understanding of reading texts?

## **1.7 Overview of the theories**

Coady (1979), voices the opinion that the basic psycholinguistic model of ESL reading evolves around the role of prior experiences or background knowledge the reader possesses and relates to the reading text. Adding weight to this assumption is the notion that perception and understanding of what is being read lies in the existences of prior knowledge. Therefore schema theory is an offshoot of work in the field of artificial intelligence.

Schema theory propagates that the ability to learn is primarily dependent upon the existence of a schematic framework than on the stages of development of an individual. Schemata consist of a store of information, which a person uses to make sense of events and information. Schemata are multiple knowledge structures, which include culture, beliefs, expectations, values and other past experiences which are drawn upon to understand the nature of things and events. Carrell (1984) suggests that schema can be categorised into three broad areas which is “content schema” (culture, world knowledge. concepts), “formal schema”(transitional signals, genres) and “linguistic schema”(vocabulary, grammar, idioms). Studies have shown that reading a text, which is familiar to the readers’ content schemata (cultural knowledge), and



linguistic schemata; (vocabulary knowledge) had a positive effect on students understanding of reading comprehension levels.

The Psycholinguistic Model of reading professed by Goodman (1967, 1971) has described reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game”. Goodman draws heavily upon the top-down processing of a reading text. Readers begin to understand a text starting from a pre-set assumption about a text, based on its title, format and style, before they begin to look for words that will substantiate or refute these assumptions. The reader concludes meaning on the entire text.

Bottom-up processing refers to the traditional models of reading where the reader decodes words into thoughts. However this process of decoding word by word could cause some difficulty in grasping the entire meaning of the reading text.

### **1.8 Significance of the study**

This study would enable researchers as well as teachers to become aware of the importance of selecting reading texts, which are suited to the students’ cultural and vocabulary knowledge. When students read a text, which relates to their content schemata and linguistic schemata, the task of teaching is made easier. This study would be of help to teachers in understanding some of the difficulties and problems faced by rural students in understanding the reading text. The findings of this study would help to highlight some of the considerations, which the language teacher should consider in the selection of reading texts to be taught to rural students in Malaysia.

## **1.9 Limitation of the study**

The findings of this study may not be conclusively indicative of the reading difficulties, due to inadequate appropriate schemata in the students, faced by all rural students in Malaysia. The data collected from the 16 students used in this study might not be a definite indication of similar problems faced by all Form Four students in Malaysian schools. Due to time constraints; the sample in this study could not be increased to reflect a more proportionate representation of Form Four students in Malaysia. However some aspects of this study could pinpoint areas of difficulties students may face in the area of relating words in a reading text to their schematic knowledge .

## **1.10 Definition of terms**

### **1.10.1 Cultural familiarity**

Knowledge about a particular culture. A text depicting a topic, which is within the knowledge and experience of the students as opposed to an unfamiliar text, which contains cultural elements, which appears foreign to the students. Unfamiliarity does not mean total ignorance but the content will pose some difficulties. Carrel and Eisterhold (1988), Johnson (1982) gives the view that “content schema or cultural orientation in terms of background knowledge is also a factor that influences L2/FL reading. The writers goes on to say that “participants better comprehended and remembered passages that were similar in some way to their native cultures”. In attempting to answer research question one, this study would help to identify the possibility that students lack content (cultural) knowledge of a text and therefore encounter difficulty in understanding it.

### **1.10.2 Reading ability**

Is defined as the ability to interpret written or printed material with understanding. According to Nunan (1989:35) “a successful reader is able to use different technique for different purposes of reading”. Huges (1973) is of the view that reading ability plays an important role in education.

### **1.10.3 Understanding**

This term is a complex cognitive process in which reader tries to reconstruct a written message that is encoded in graphic language. The extent the reader representation of the writer’s intended message confirms with the original message. Rumelhart (1977) concedes that understanding involves the reader, the text, and the interaction between the reader and the text.

### **1.10.4 Schema**

Schema theory is a theory about how knowledge is represented in the human memory. Prior experiences or background knowledge the reader possesses and relates to the reading text. Schemas have been described as “cognitive constructs, which allow for the organisation of information in long term memory (Widdowson, 1983,). Cook (1989) states, “the mind stimulated by key words or phrases in the text or by context, activates a knowledge schema” (Cook, 1989, p. 69).