

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Mrs Sanam, the teacher began her lesson by telling her students to form three groups. The excited girls gathered their texts and congregated around their friends. It was the first time that they were asked to perform a literary text. The teacher proceeded to assign three different events in the text, *The Lamp* to the groups. She gave them 15 minutes to discuss their presentation. The classroom resonated with the animated chatter and giggles of the students as they discussed ways to act out the story. Then, the groups took turns to perform in class. ‘Salim’s mother’ acted out the part of an irate and exhausted parent creditably between fits of giggles. Hanida improvised with her own lines when she fluffed the lines of her character. ‘Salim’ screamed in agony when “the fire” singed “his arm”. After the performance, the teacher asked them for their feedback. The students told their teacher about the importance of facial expression, delivering the lines well and having empathy for the characters.

( 2002, unpublished field notes)

#### 1.1 Introduction

The study of literature focuses on the in-depth study of authentic texts. The learners will have to engage with the texts actively to understand and appreciate them. This may involve verbalizing their responses to the texts as well as bringing alive the text through performance. In the excerpt above, the students showed great enthusiasm in portraying the characters and events in a text which is more interesting as opposed to teacher-fronted lessons.

This study will explore the use of performance in developing student responses to literature in an ESL classroom. It will investigate how performance will be played out in the teaching and learning of literature in the Malaysian context.

This chapter will discuss the background to the study, including the three major ways literature plays out in the Malaysian school system, the statement of the problem, the research questions and the importance of the study. The vignette above shows how performance of texts can be incorporated into the study of literary texts as a means of getting students actively involved in the meaning making, interpretation and recreation of texts. The statement of the problem will highlight the need to develop students' responses to literature in the mainly teacher-fronted classrooms while the significance of the study will detail the reasons for undertaking research in this area.

## **1.2 The Background of the Study**

The background of the study will explain how literature was introduced in Malaysian secondary schools. The three main forms in which literature features in the Malaysian curriculum are: in the literature component in the English Language Syllabus, literature as an elective subject and literature-based co-curricular activities.

In Malaysia today therefore, literature may be experienced by secondary school students in the national school system in three possible ways: as part of English language learning, as an elective in the upper secondary level as well as through literature-based co-curricular activities. Literature and English Language have been offered as separate subjects in the Malaysian urban secondary schools since the British colonial era. During these early days, English was the medium of instruction in key urban schools and the medium of British colonial administration (Asmah Hj Omar, 1990). In 1967, the decision to implement the Malay Language as the medium of instruction saw a change in the use of the language as English was pushed into a "low key" situation. (Asmah Hj Omar, 1990, p.72). The English language was relegated to the status of a single subject taught in all schools. The lack of

exposure to the language and the limited need to use the language had a drastic impact on students' proficiency levels in the language.

According to a survey conducted by the UMSEP team of University Malaya in 1971, "the linguistic deficit" (Asmah, 1990, p.72) was alarming and the team underscored the necessity for the continued use of English. Steps were taken to improve the students' proficiency levels in English. One major move was the introduction of the literature component in the English language programme.

### **1.2.1 Literature in the Language Classroom**

Literature in the language classroom has been played out in a number curriculum initiatives over the past two decades in Malaysian secondary schools. The first phase, the English Language Reading Programme (ELRP) was targeted for residential schools in Malaysia in the mid 1970's. The success of the ELRP led to its implementation in 310 schools nation-wide. When the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools or *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah* (KBSM) was launched nation-wide in 1982, the ELRP was carried out in all secondary schools. The rationale was that literature enhances learners' abilities to articulate their ideas in English and broaden their perceptions about life and people. In general, enjoyment of literature would encourage the reading habit.

In 1989, the Class Reader Programme (CRP) was introduced in secondary schools to encourage students to improve their command of English by perusing literary texts. The main aims of the programme were to expose students to the literary genres of prose, poetry and drama, prepare students for literature courses at higher levels and to inculcate the reading habit among learners. The rationale was that the CRP would ensure that learners would "be able to read and appreciate works of poetry and prose for knowledge and enjoyment"(CRP Guide Book For Secondary Schools, 1989, p.4). All class readers were either simplified or

abridged versions of authentic texts and were classified as elementary, intermediate and advanced.

Subsequently, in the year 2000, the advent of globalisation and the pressing need for multi-literate knowledge workers necessitated the study of literary works from various cultures and countries like Malaysia, America, Britain and the Commonwealth nations. The texts are to be used to teach the language content and language skills while exposing students to a variety of cultures. Besides, exposure to good music, fine arts, and literature would develop the “aesthetic sensibility” (Rosenblatt, 1970) of the learners who would grow up to be cultured individuals. This is reflected in one of the aims of the literature component in the current English Language Syllabus:

The aesthetic purposes of language use involves the ability to enjoy literary texts at a level appropriate to learners’ ability. Learners are expected to be able to express ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively (*Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, English Language Syllabus, 2002, p. 4*).

The syllabus also stipulates that students should be able to express themselves imaginatively and creatively by dramatizing texts, reciting poems with expression and narrating stories with feeling. This underscores the notion that performance of texts has a crucial part to play in the teaching and learning of literature as it harnesses the physical, emotional and intellectual abilities of learners to perform the texts.

### **1.2.2 Literature in English Elective**

Prior to 1990, literature as a subject was examined solely by the Examination Syndicate which also determined the literary texts that were to be examined on a yearly basis. In 1990, the Literature in English elective was introduced by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The elective which is offered at upper secondary level, is taught over three periods

per week. Authentic literary texts from the four genres are used to encourage students to develop literary competence so that they are able to communicate their responses to texts supported with reasons as well as develop a familiarity with the main forms of literary expression and literary devices used.

The five main objectives of the Literature in English elective are to develop in learners “an awareness of the value and pleasure of reading good literary works, an appreciation and a deeper understanding of important human concerns and human relationships, an ability to appreciate values which would enhance an understanding of themselves and their relationships with others” ( *Kementerian Pendidikan, Malaysia, Literature in English Syllabus*, 1990 p.2 ). The texts are used to encourage students to develop literary and linguistic competencies.

The syllabus also stipulates that learners should be given adequate opportunities “to respond to the texts and to express themselves creatively” ( *Kementerian Pendidikan, Malaysia, Literature in English Syllabus*, 1990, p.2). This indicates that students should not only be able to read and enjoy authentic texts, they should also be able to interpret the levels of meaning nested in the texts and display their understanding through written and physical expression. The document also underscores the importance of learner-centred lessons in stating that “strategies employed for teaching should be student-centred” ( *Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, Literature in English Syllabus*, 1990). This reiterates the notion that students should be competent in the language and be actively involved in the lessons while the teachers should utilise a variety of activities and techniques to empower students to articulate their opinions and thoughts about texts. The subject would also serve as a springboard for the learners who intend to pursue literary studies at the tertiary level or venture into theatre-based activities.

### **1.2.3 Literature-based Co-curricular Activities**

The third avenue for the study of literature is through literature-based activities carried out by English language societies in schools. According to a directive of the Director General of Education, dated 4 January, 1999, (See Appendix 1) all schools should implement activities related to the English Language in order to expose students to activities in the target language. These activities include poetry recitation, jazz chants, choral speaking and drama. The same circular stipulates that student participation in such activities would enable them to articulate their responses to texts, unleash their creativity and heighten their awareness that such activities can be pursued for educational and entertainment purposes. The directive also states that such activities should be conducted after school and in accordance with the conditions, facilities and resources available in the schools.

Besides, appropriate and interesting activities that are carried out through a collaboration between teachers and students would enable the learners to engage their intellect, emotions and imagination as they grapple with the texts and recreate or lift the texts off the page by interpreting and performing them in front of an audience. These activities would also provide ample opportunities for the learners to engage in talk about the texts which would in turn enable them to respond in an informed manner both orally and in the written form.

The grappling with the “ representational language” ( MacRae, 1991, p.3) of texts during such activities would sharpen the creative and critical skills of the students. However, one must be aware that the purpose of such activities is not merely to have fun but to help students express their views and interpretation of the texts confidently and competently. Vethamani underscores this notion when he opines that “the dramatic aspect of presentation

is important but the emphasis should be on the students' overall interpretation of the text and not just the artistry of presentation" (*The Star*, March 15, 1992, p. 26).

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

This section discusses the reasons the research was undertaken and the context in which it was carried out. There is a pressing need to research literature teaching and learning in the Malaysian context and in particular the use of performance in the ESL class. Performance has been strongly recommended to help learners acquire literary and linguistic competence as well as an awareness of the multicultures locally and abroad. However, the focus has been by way of discussions of methodology for teachers. What is necessary for effective teaching is capturing the learning that takes place. Students' processing and perceptions about the way they experience performance in literature.

It is important to investigate how literature is played out in a class. There is a need to research the day-to-day activities of the literature class and the roles played by the teacher and students in the class. Currently there is a dearth of studies in this area. It is essential to research how students develop responses to literature lessons. Many of the lessons are teacher-fronted ones. The teachers, as "sages on stage" explicate literary elements of texts in detail and emphasize the literary devices employed by the authors. However, scholarship in the field indicates that effective learning of literature can only take place in learner-centred classes. Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory states that meaning resides not merely in the text but is only grasped through an active transaction between the learner and the text. It also foregrounds learner-centredness. We need to investigate how student responses may be shaped through literature in an ESL classroom.

Thirdly there is a need to develop performance which has been marginalized in literature lessons. In learner-centred pedagogy, various activities are utilised to encourage

student-centredness. Among the variety of oral and written activities, the key activity is performance of texts. It encourages the interface between the target language and literature and allows the students to communicate their creative expressions through verbal and non-verbal features. This dimension has to be better understood if teachers and students are to be encouraged to use performance in literature lessons as well as in ESL classes.

This case study therefore attempts to explore the use of performance in a particular Form Four ESL class of an all girls school. In a nutshell, it investigates how performances in and out-of-class shape student responses to literature. The performance-based activities in class focus on reading and performance of texts, group discussions and students' written responses to texts. The out-of-class performances would include drama and choral speaking. The study was carried out by the teacher-researcher who was involved in both the teaching and learning as well as the researching.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

This qualitative case study was driven by the following research questions.

1. What are teacher and student perceptions regarding the study of literature?
2. How do in-class performance experiences shape student responses to literature?
3. How do out-of-class performance experiences shape student responses to literature?
4. What are teacher and student perceptions regarding the use of performance in developing students responses to literature?

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This section attempts to explicate the benefits that the findings of the study would offer to the three stakeholders related to the literature teaching and learning scenario. They are the literature teachers, the teacher educators and the curriculum designers.



Firstly, the findings of the study may motivate teachers to utilise performance in their literature classes so that lessons can be organised on a continuum ranging from teacher-fronted ones to completely student-centred lessons. Performance would enable students to participate actively in the lessons rather than perpetuate the “banking concept” in which learners are perceived as empty vessels that have to be filled up with knowledge transmitted primarily by the teachers. A learner-centred pedagogy would also enable the students to perceive the study of literature as one “ that activates the brain rather than one that sucks a student dry of energy and patience” (Suryana Mohammad, *New Straits Times*, 8 August, 2002, p. 9). The findings should provide insights as to how learners experience performance in literature which may be useful in helping teachers design and implement such activities.

Secondly, teacher educators too can utilise the findings in planning language courses for teachers. Teachers need to be trained in the methodology and techniques of carrying out literature lessons that would foreground student involvement in the lessons. They need to be exposed to the techniques of conducting poem recital, choral speaking and the dramatisation of texts so that they can help to scaffold their learners to articulate their responses to texts in both the oral and written forms.

Curriculum developers too would benefit from the findings as the performance of texts incorporates the authentic use of English Language in an interesting and enjoyable manner. It would ensure that literature lessons do not degenerate into mechanical and tedious discrete point language exercises. Language course designers can obtain a better understanding of learner needs, learners’ actual language use and their linguistic and literary competencies through performance. It is a strategy that can be utilised not just in language and literature courses but also to determine the types of teaching and learning and the preparation of teaching resources. Therefore the findings would offer a

designers on how to plan literature and language courses that are informative, meaningful and enjoyable to both teachers and students.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examines the background to the study, the three major ways in which literature is played out in the class. It also explores the need to foreground performance in the teaching and learning of literature in learner-centred lessons. The study investigates ways in which performance could be used to empower students to read and appreciate literary texts in school and after they leave the educational institutions and perform on the stage of the real world. Hence, the exploration of co-curricular activities which link in-class activities and out-of-class activities is a crucial one. Finally the chapter also describes the benefits that the findings of the study would offer to the main stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning of literature.