CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Literature used to feature in the English Language classrooms throughout Malaysia in the early years until a focus on language for communication became dominant. With the introduction of the functional and later the communicative syllabuses, the main focus was on the utilitarian use of language and students were taught communicative skills and asked to “perform” communicative tasks based on real-life situations. Thus, the role of Literature was greatly downplayed and apart from the occasional use of short stories and poems as tools in teaching English, the presence of Literature gradually began to fade from the English Language classrooms.

The importance of Literature as a complement to English Language teaching and learning began to be realised with the continual deterioration of the English Language proficiency nationwide. The realisation of its importance as well as the need for it to be formally integrated in the teaching and learning of English was clearly reflected through the introduction of the New Integrated Secondary Curriculum in 1989. Thus, Literature began to take root and make its presence felt strongly again, as it regained its position in the English Language classrooms throughout the country. Today, Literature is assigned a more prominent role to play in the teaching and learning of English. This is evident with the recent introduction of the Literature component in the English Language curriculum.

As such, it is timely to examine the process of teaching and learning of literature involved in this curriculum change. The Literature in English Component was officially implemented and included as a part of the English Language Syllabus in May 2000. The
sections in this chapter provide a brief background to the study. Firstly, it will trace the history of Literature in English in the school curriculum and its status with regards to the English Language Syllabus starting from the late 80’s. Next, it describes the Literature in English Component and the steps taken in its implementation. Finally, the aims of the proposed study and its significance will be discussed.

1.1 Background

In the late 1980’s, there was an outcry of public concern about the deteriorating standards of English among Malaysian learners. The decline was thought to be at its worse when the nationwide success rate for the SPM English Language Paper kept dropping. This shocking and alarming drop was an obvious indication that secondary school learners were having problems with regard to the English Language. It was speculated that among the main contributing factors was their poor reading habits. It was felt that Malaysian learners were not reading texts in English extensively. This contributed to the lack of exposure to the language and thus affecting their proficiency.

Hence, it was felt that immediate and drastic measures must be taken to firstly remedy the general lack of interest towards reading and to indirectly battle the decreasing standard of English among the students. Thus, it was armed with these aims that the Class Reader Programme then made its way into the classroom.

1.2 The Class Reader Programme

The Class Reader Programme (CRP) made its debut into the classrooms throughout the country in 1989. Basically, it aimed at inculcating better reading habits among the
young and to raise their interest as well as awareness towards literature by exposing them to various types of simplified literary materials. It was hoped that eventually, through this, the students’ language proficiency would be indirectly developed, hence upgrading their standard of English. The introduction of the CRP was also as a part of the newly introduced Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah or the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum, whereby one of its objectives is to enable students to “...read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment” (1988, p.2) by the end of their schooling. Hence, with the CRP, it was hoped that students would be able to read independently and form their own opinions.

Initially, students were required to sit for the standardised National Diagnostic Test to test their proficiency levels before appropriate books were assigned by the Ministry. Schools were provided the sets of the assigned text to be used in class.

The cascade model was used to implement this curriculum innovation. Teacher representatives from each schools were also required to undergo a training session organised by the respective State Education Department. These representatives in turn were expected to conduct an in-house training for the other teachers. Based on the accompanying Teaching Files, teachers were to plan activities and tasks that would enable their students to fully explore the text and the students would prepare a notebook to write any assigned written tasks or their personal responses to text.

Despite the recent introduction of the literature component, the CRP is still in force in schools. There are, unfortunately, many drawbacks and “loopholes” in the programme. Among the most prominent is the mismatch between the text selection and students’ proficiency. As a result, students with English as their first language find the
texts unchallenging while those to whom English is a third or foreign language find the text too difficult. According to a report by the Ministry of Education's School Division, teachers often need to use other supplementary materials to meet with the students' needs, either making reading more challenging or more accessible.

However, even after 10 years of its implementation, many teachers are neither formally trained to carry out the programme nor formally informed of the focus which should be adopted. This is especially the case with newly graduated teachers and those teaching English Language without a TESL background, especially in the rural areas. As a result, teachers in general either merely apply their own interpretation of what is expected of the programme thus making the Class Reader lesson just another reading comprehension lesson, or they do away with the one-40-minute-period a week lesson, mainly due to time constraints as a result of the importance of other exam-related skills. Many of the CRP texts thus lie forgotten in the cupboard, and CRP seems in many cases to have died a natural death.

Hence, the Ministry of Education felt there was a need to revive the Literature in English programme, but to ensure that this new Literature programme will not face the same fate as the CRP, it is incorporated into the English Language Syllabus and is called the Literature in English Component.

1.3 The Literature in English Component

In July 1999, the Malaysian Curriculum Development Center (CDC) announced that Literature in English would be incorporated, taught and examined as a component of the English Language subject.
The aims of the new Literature in English Component (LEC) is very similar to that of its predecessor: to inculcate better reading habits among students so as to improve the deteriorating standard of English among them. According to the CDC, only authentic literary materials will be used in the component as those texts can help in exposing the students to foreign cultures and the ways of life of people on other parts of the world or from a different period. This can help to increase the students' general knowledge as well as create a greater sensitivity to the people and the world around them. It is also hoped that this literary awareness will motivate the students to continue to read for information as well as enjoyment. More importantly, although the LEC will be examined, the examination will only be in the form of students' personal responses towards the texts. Thus, by focussing mainly on personal responses and by encouraging students to personally respond to the literary works, it is hoped that they will further understand themselves, the people they meet and the world they live in as they relate what they read with their own experiences.

1.3.1 Implementation of the Literature in English Component

Once the framework of the LEC had been drawn up and agreed upon by the Ministry of Education and the CDC, a list of literary texts was handed to a panel of experts to be shortlisted and finally selected. While the list comprised novels, short stories, poems and plays, the panel of experts comprised of experienced teachers as well as representatives from various departments in the Ministry. Among the aspects that were considered were the suitability of the texts in terms of language, content, format and the authors of the literary work.
Once details regarding the LEC had been finalised and agreed upon, the cascade model was again used in implementation. The CDC and the Ministry then informed each of the State Education Departments of the LEC’s objectives and suggested strategies for implementation. This information was then passed on to the Language Department of the various District Education Offices within each state (see Appendix A for letters). At this point, news of the forthcoming incorporation of the Literature in English as a component into the syllabus had hit the newspaper headlines. It became a much debated topic, especially among English Language teachers.

Initially, the LEC was expected to make its way into the classrooms nationwide commencing the academic year of 2000, starting with the Forms 1’s and 4’s, followed by the other forms the following year. However, official letters of its implementation were only received by most schools throughout the country in late February or early March of the year 2000. There was also a change as far as the texts were concerned: although initially individual schools were to be assigned with texts suitable to their students’ ability, it was later decided that all the schools nationwide will be using the same set texts (see Appendix B for list of selected texts). Unfortunately, the first set of texts which comprised short stories and poems was only available in June after the First Semester Holidays and the novels would only be sent out at a later date which was not specified. Hence, despite receiving the directive to begin the LEC, most schools had to postpone its introduction at least until May. Furthermore, teachers were also not ready as they had yet to be briefed of the LEC and how it should be implemented and taught.

In April and May, even during the one week school Semester holidays which began on May 27th 2000, each State Education Departments through its District Education
Offices organised a two to three day in-service training sessions. These sessions were attended by two representatives teaching Forms 1 and 4 from each school, which might or might not include the Heads of the English Language Department. The “workshop” was to inform as well as train the schools’ representatives on what LEC is all about and how it should be implemented. Depending on the funds allocated by the State Education Department, the workshop was either conducted on a small scale for one or two days within the state itself or on a large scale on a three day full time basis outside of the state.

Upon completing this course, the teachers were thus expected to conduct an “in-house” training session which ranged from an hour to three hours depending on the teachers and the schools. During this session, photocopied samples of teacher-support materials that were obtained during the “workshop” were distributed to the other teachers. Finally, it was up to these teachers to brief the students they were responsible to, as to the latest changes in the English Language syllabus.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

The components’ design and inclusion may have been well justified and rationalised by the authorities involved. Unfortunately, it was officially implemented without a reasonable testing period to evaluate its smooth-running in real classroom situation. The absence of this pilot-test and the possible opportunity for an inquiry to obtain first hand feedback from teachers and students thus denied the CDC in particular, and the Ministry in general, the valuable information of what would, or would not, work in an average Malaysian classroom situation. Of great significance is the process of dissemination of information. Information on its aims, objectives, structure and content
had to penetrate through several "layers" before finally reaching the people responsible for its implementation: the teachers. Thus, some valuable information would have been lost in the process. Furthermore, the dissemination of information at school level was not monitored and standardised, and was left totally up to the discretion of the teacher representatives. As a result of this change management, what was imparted to the representatives in the two to three day sessions were merely conveyed to the others within one to three hours.

In the light of all these, there is a need to closely examine what is actually happening in a LEC classroom: what are the teachers and the students actually doing in a typical Literature in English teaching and learning session and what are the learning outcomes. Although it was announced that the students' performance in the component would be primarily tested based on their transaction (Rosenblatt, 1987) with the literary texts, it would be an eye-opening experience to find out how exactly their performances are being measured at class, and eventually at school level. To be more specific, this study will examine the process of the implementation of the LEC by observing two Form 1 classes in a selected secondary school located in the District of Petaling in Selangor.

Based on the aims outlined above, this study will attempt to seek answers to the following research questions:

(i) What are the approaches used to teach selected literary texts in the two Form 1 classes?

(ii) How do students respond to selected literary texts in the two Form 1 classes?

(iii) What are the teachers' and students' perceptions of the literature based activities in the two Form 1 classes?
1.5 Significance of the Study.

On the macro level, the findings of this study would give the CDC and the Ministry of Education an insight into how informed teachers of LEC’s are regarding desired aims and objectives and how much of formal training they have had, and or desperately need, to implement the programme. Thus, it is hoped that these findings will encourage the Ministry to provide sufficient formal and on-going training as well as support for teachers of the LEC and to ensure that teachers are well informed and fully trained before they are directed to embark on any other new programme.

The findings of this study would also reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the LEC in practice as it identifies the major problems the two main players, the teachers and the students, are faced with especially in relation with the literary text and the teaching and learning process. It will also, more importantly, reveal the quality and quantity of both the input as well as the intake in the teaching and learning of the LEC. It is thus hoped that the CDC and the Ministry will take the necessary steps for the further improvement of the programme, to enable it to achieve the goals it aspires to achieve in the first place.

Finally, it is hoped that this study would also benefit the selected school and other schools sharing its characteristics through the recommendations made as it highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and learning of Literature in English from the researcher’s first hand observation and experience.