CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study on the teaching and learning of literature in two Form 1 classrooms yielded invaluable information on teacher and student perceptions of as well as the classroom experiences of the latest literature initiative. Findings also revealed the students’ own personal responses to the selected literary texts and the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the literature based activities conducted in the classes. This section thus presents the findings on the teaching and learning of literature in the two Form 1 Classes as well as discusses their implications. These findings emerged as a result of an eight week study of the classes in an urban secondary school.

4.1 Teacher-Student Perceptions of the Literature Initiative

Throughout the duration of the study, the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the recent incorporation of literature in the Form 1 English Language Syllabus were probed. Teachers’ perceptions with regard the Ministry of Education’s implementational strategies for the programme were also explored. This section discusses the teachers’ and students’ perceptions obtained through interviews and journal entries.

4.1.1 Teachers’ Perceptions of the Literature in English Component.

Both Jane and Anis, the teacher participants for the study, fully support the rationale for the implementation of Literature in English Component. They voiced awareness of the role of literature in improving students’ language proficiency
(Widdowson, 1978; Mahmud, 1989; Ibsen, 1990). Jane, who majored in Literature as a Bachelor of Arts undergraduate student, articulated this. She said “literature plays a very important role in [building students’] English proficiency [as] it exposes them to [the target language]”. Anis felt that unlike “the stereotyped textbook comprehension passages”, the authenticity of the language used in the literary texts helps to widen the vocabulary of her lower proficiency students (Hill, 1983; Collie & Slater, 1987). She also agreed that the texts could help students improve their writing styles (Gwin, 1990).

The teachers also expressed that the move to incorporate literature into the curriculum can help widen their students’ general knowledge. They were thus aware of the wealth of contribution that literature can make in increasing students’ knowledge of the world (Carter & Long, 1991). According to Jane, “most of the kids didn’t even know who Shakespeare was. Now they even know Ali Majod !”. Anis in contrast felt that literature helps to widen the horizons of her students as it exposed her “Kampung Kayu Ara kids [who lived] in their own small world” to the ways of lives of people in other cultures and in other parts of the world.

4.1.2 Teachers’ Perceptions of Dissemination of Information for Implementation

Although the teachers applauded the move of incorporating literature into the English Language Syllabus, they expressed great frustration at the amount of information they received regarding the change and its implementation. Both Jane and Anis first heard of the component through the circular sent to the school by the District Education Office in February, 2000. They next heard of it when they were called for the “brief briefing”, according to Anis, by the Head of the English Language Department who had
earlier attended a one week District Level course on the component. "We were told, but definitely not informed, [of the change]", Anis recalled sadly. A top-down approach of the cascade model was inarguably necessary for standardisation (Kennedy, 1996; Gilpin, 1997; Kennedy, 1999). Unfortunately, it assumed that the teacher-representatives were qualified enough to disseminate information regarding the change to their peers within a short time frame. As a result, teachers, the main implementers of the change and the key determiners of success or failure, felt that the briefing did not provide enough information. Unlike the teachers in Schon's (1971) study who went through "zones of uncertainty" (in Fullan, 1991, p. 31) when faced with too much information on change, the teachers in this study went through similar zones of uncertainty but as a result of not enough information and not being informed enough.

4.1.3 Teachers' Perceptions of Training

Jane and Anis also expressed great frustrations as they needed for more support in terms of teaching techniques and strategies. Of the two, Anis was especially confused as to which direction she should steer her lessons towards. According to Anis, teachers like her "with no serious literature background are in big trouble!" for she had had very little training in teaching literature during her undergraduate days. The lack of training and information had thus led Anis to use the literary materials without changing her teaching approaches, similar to the teachers in Fullan's (1974) study. Even Jane who had some experience in literature wished that "[the authorities] would give us some training to give [teachers] some directions to follow". Hence, the absence of proper training and support in the actual implementation of the change at classroom level eventually led to great
confusion, frustration and anxiety among teachers towards the change and the new role expected of them (Charters & Pellegrin, 1973; Huberman & Miles, 1984).

4.1.4 Teachers' Perceptions of the Availability of Teacher Support

Both teachers expressed the desperate need for more teaching-support materials, apart from the "well-thumbed workbook" that was recommended to them. Jane revealed that during the briefing, they were just given copies of the sample exercises that were distributed to school representatives during the State Level training session (see Appendix F for handout). Anis confessed that "the Setia Emas workbook [the Head of Department] recommended during the briefing is my bible", adding that all her lessons and the written exercises she assigned her students were drawn or taken from it. Jane also admitted to the "useful[ness]" of the "recommended workbook" which she based all of her writing exercises on, as she "can't afford to spend any time making [her] own teaching aid or handouts [as] there are so much of other things [such as] marking to do". Both teachers obviously felt victimised by the classroom press (Huberman, 1974 in Fullan 1991). As a result of this, together with the pressure due to the lack of proper training, the teachers depended greatly on what was prescribed or "recommended". Although they support the move of incorporating literature into the syllabus, they felt taken for granted (Goh, 1999). Thus, they viewed the change as frivolous (Lortie, 1975 in Fullan, 1991).

4.1.5 Students' Perceptions of the Inclusion of Literature

The two key student participants of Form 1 Ceria displayed confusion and uncertainty towards the aims and objectives for incorporating literature in the Form 1 English
Language Curriculum. The need for an explanation as to the reason for bringing literature into the language classroom was politely expressed by Sia Vern, in the very last line of her first journal entry, “By the way, why must we learn literature?” Just as her teacher was groping for directions to follow in the implementation, Sia Vern’s question could be interpreted as asking reasons for the innovation in student terms. The direction literature lessons were heading would have been clearer if the teacher had informed the high proficiency students that apart from language development (Lazar, 1993; Widdowson, 1985; Collie & Slater 1997), literature also increases general knowledge (Stern, 1987) and fosters personal development (Hill, 1986; Protherough, 1989; Carter & Long, 1991). This would motivate the students as they realised the reasons as to “why the teacher made [them] read all [those] stories and poems”, as voiced by a confused Karl.

The two other key student participants, who were less vocal even when asked in Bahasa Melayu, were at a loss too although they agreed that “literature is good for [them]”. Both Kevin and Sue guessed that the obvious reason why they were asked to read the literary pieces was “to make [their] English better”. Although the students could guess that literature was there to help them improve their English, a simple explanation how this could be achieved and more importantly a reassurance from the teacher that it is achievable, could do wonders in boosting their morale in facing a totally foreign and new “subject” or text. As proposed by Hill (1986), this would make them more motivated and confident as a reader of a text almost foreign to them.

4.2 The Teaching of Literature in the Two Form 1 Classes

The approaches used by the teachers of the two Form 1 classes in the study may be
characterised as being eclectic and sometimes piecemeal. They used literature as a basis for language teaching, they read aloud, they compared texts, they explored micro features such as setting and they made links with the personal experiences of their students.

4.2.1 Springboard for Language Activities

Both teachers made use of the text to teach vocabulary. Anis, whose students were of extremely low proficiency, aggressively used *The Pencil* and *The Dead Crow*, the two texts her class had time to read, to teach her students vocabulary. This was also the main language activity in the class. "Out of a para of 45 words, at least 20 are problematic", she revealed. In explaining the paragraph, she resorted to directly translating what was read into Bahasa Melayu, to her, the most pragmatic solution in getting her students to understand. Even then, she sometimes had to further rephrased the standard Bahasa Melayu translation into colloquial form or *Bahasa Pasar*. Pat, for example, failed to grasp the Bahasa Melayu meaning of "cincang" for "chopped". Mohandas was at a total loss when asked, "*Mengapa dia, Zahid, merasa begitu geram terhadap Mr. Jamal?*" to explain "Zahid's intense anger" (p. 32) in *The Pencil*. He was able to respond, though not quite correctly, after Anis rephrased the question into "*Kenapa itu budak Zahid rasa sangat marah sama itu Mr. Jamal?*" (see Appendix G for lesson transcript). Anis, however, did not give her students spelling or dictation exercises, "since reading alone occupied the entire period". All of the written vocabulary exercises came in the form of cloze texts contained in the Setia Emas workbook.

Vocabulary is thus still the main focus in the teaching and learning of literature in this case. However, though it is argued that most teachers are too concerned with
how much a text can help to enrich their students’ vocabulary (Koh 1990), Anis’s main concern was getting her students to understand the text more than getting them to learn the words. Furthermore, even if she had wanted her students to ‘learn’ the words, they would not have been able to do so though they may have understood the story, for the number of words the low proficiency learners found difficult were just too many.

Jane’s more proficient students had no problems with most of the texts. However, they found difficulty with culturally unfamiliar words like “bean-rows”, “wattles” and “linnet” from *The Lake Isle of Innesfree*, and “zakat” and “pemajangan” among other Bahasa Melayu words used in *Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes*. These culturally unfamiliar words thus hindered text comprehension by ESL learners (Rumelhart, 1980; Nuttal, 1982; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988). Yet, it was rather peculiar that the students found it easier to guess the meanings of the culturally unfamiliar words from the poem that was set in Ireland as compared to the short story that was set in Malaysia. Perhaps the reason for this could be that the students, coming from high-income homes and being L1 speakers of English, had been exposed to foreign expressions either through books or the media. Hence, they were able to infer the meanings of the words in *The Lake Isle of Innesfree* faster. For example, in a poem he wrote, Karl referred to “birches”, “oaks” and “willows”, trees which can be found in England in particular (see Appendix H for poem). Furthermore, the non-Malay urban students had not been too exposed to the traditions of a Malay wedding. Nevertheless, it was evident that literary texts did compel the students to interpret and read between the lines (Lazar, 1993) as they were faced with a challenging psycholinguistic guessing game (Goodman, 1975).
4.2.2  Reading Aloud of Texts

Reading aloud is a very common activity in both the classes. While Jane’s students had no problem with pronunciation, Anis’s students groped and struggled. It was almost expected for the students to have difficulty with words that were probably new to them like “exhausted”, but they also had problems pronouncing words which they may have even seen or heard before such as “completely” and “broke”. Thus, Anis had to intervene incessantly. Among the reasons for the difficulty could be that the students may have seen or heard the words often but they may not have spoken or read it aloud, or they may have heard the words but were unable to recognise them in written form. It could also be that although the students knew the words or they wanted to try saying it, they were not confident enough to do so in front of a large audience. Sue hinted at this by confiding that she wished Anis would “ask the [whole] class [to] read together” so that no one can hear her “bad” pronunciation.

Typically, a reading session in Form 1 Ramah would include individual students being called to in turn read a stanza each from The Crow and a short paragraph for The Pencil. Thus, Anis’s reading lessons was too predictable and routined. Her rationale for asking her students to take turns in reading the text to the class was to “help them say the difficult words” and to “check their pronunciation”. It was fortunate that her students were too engrossed with the text to care. Though this is a fair justification, under normal circumstances, her students might have become demotivated and bored after a while.

On one occasion, Anis was called out of class. Before she left, she asked her students to continue reading the next four paragraphs and to ensure that this was carried out, she asked them to write a list of words they found difficult. Prem was sharing a book
with his friend Mohandas. While Mohandas was pointing at each of the words, Prem was mouthing something unintelligible. Upon asking him to whisper the words out at least, should he fear making too much noise, he told me he could not read. According to Anis, there were a few others illiterate like Prem, but to put them in a special group, to prepare special materials and to give them different tasks or individual attention would "take too much time". In an ordinary English lesson, where there was no story to listen to, Prem's inability to read and 'copy' well made him very restless and he would disturb his friends. This is a common scene in most low ability classes in the country, but most of these students go either unnoticed or are not helped. The use of standardised texts which were inaccessible to the low proficiency students undermines their morale and detracts from their learning of the language. In this case, language streaming and graded authentic texts seem to be the best solution to cater for the linguistic needs of individual students.

Jane's students "got so excited when [they] first got the text that [they] read the entire book at home", revealed Sia Vern. Despite this, their excitement was still high when most of the texts were read out in class prior to the writing tasks. However, they questioned the necessity to reread *The Crow* and *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* and to recap the plot and characters in *The Pencil* and *Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes* all over again in Jane's attempt to teach setting, for "[they] knew the [texts] so well". One of the dilemmas faced by teachers when teaching reading is who should keep the texts. If the students were to keep the texts, their excitement and curiosity would eventually lead them to read the text on their own. Thus, they would be less curious and excited, unlike first time readers, when the text is read and discussed in class as "[they] already knew the whole story". It is impossible to assign teachers to keep the books for each of the class
that they teach because of the lack of space. Yet, if the reading text was shared as with
the present Class Readers, getting, distributing and collecting the books would take up
more precious teaching time. Also, there was still be the ‘danger’ of having students
reading the entire text when the class has just begun with page one. However, though
text familiarity may be argued as an obstacle to reading enjoyment, each reading could
provide students with fresh experiences with and new interpretations of the text. This
could be achieved through communal or dramatised reading aloud for example, which
could bring the students’ reading experience alive and to a higher level.

4.2.3 Explication of Text

Both the teachers played a very dominant role in reading and interpreting the
poems and short stories, a scene familiar in literature classes (Brown, 1987; Salasar, 1992;
Icoz, 1992). Jane felt that although her lessons were rather teacher-centered, she did
allow a fair amount of freedom for her students to make their own interpretations,
depending on the texts’ difficulty. My observation of her lessons, however, revealed that
although she threw the questions to her students, she ended up imposing her own ideas,
having failed to get their attention (see Appendix I for lesson transcript). Hence, even
with training in teaching literature as in Jane’s case, without a change in teacher beliefs
(Fullan, 1991 & White, 1988), the educational change will not fully materialise.

According to Anis, the high teacher dependency was due to the students’
extremely low proficiency, as “English is to [most of] them is more alien than Hindi”.
Anis resorted to interpreting the texts for them as well due to the length of time taken just
to read and explain the meaning of words. Furthermore, she wanted her students to
understand the texts as much as possible "for the sake of the exam". Haunted by the looming exam, Anis is obviously pressured by notions of the 'right response'. Should the language in The Pencil have been slightly easier for the low proficiency students, they would depended less on their teacher because they could truly relate to the text. Hence, language barrier greatly hinders a fully student-centered interpretation of literary reading.

4.2.4 Comparison Across Texts

My first observation saw Jane cross-comparing four of the short stories and poems that had been previously read in her attempt to teach setting. Her rationale for teaching setting through text comparison rather than exploring it when the individual texts were read in class was it would be easier for her students to characterize setting. By isolating the exploration of setting from the encounter with the text, a valuable and an integral part of the literary reading experience was lost. In turn, the quality and the quantity of the transaction and interaction between the reader and the text (Protherough, 1989) is affected.

The questions Jane posed on setting were the ones in the handout distributed to teachers at a District Level In-service Course (see Appendix J for handout). It may thus be inferred that teachers needed more training on how to deal with the literary texts as even a teacher with a background in literature, like Jane, is uncertain as to what exactly was demanded out of her lessons.

Since her students could not define setting, Jane wrote the definition on the board to save time. Perhaps a different response might have been obtained if the teacher-question had been reformulated (see Appendix K for lesson transcript). Furthermore, cross-text comparison is a sophisticated activity and a direct question may not be the best
strategy. However, the lack of response from the talkative lot was mainly caused by the over exploitation of the texts that resulted in boredom. The high ability students would have been able to produce more had they been encouraged to explore setting through groupwork or pairwork tasks (Brown, 1987; Oster, 1989; Ibsen, 1990).

By contrast, Anis taught setting very indirectly as they read The Pencil and The Dead Crow. She felt that teaching a literary element in isolation would scare her students and demotivate them more. Although her strategy worked, the students' knowledge of the setting could have been exploited more without forcing them to use words. The use of visuals and other 'concrete' aids can facilitate expression by students who are limited by low proficiency. For example, they could be asked to bring picture cuttings of things or places they felt were related to a particular setting and share with the class their reasons.

4.2.5 Connecting with Student Experiences

Both the teachers made connections between what was read with their students' experiences, but these were not extensively explored. While reading The Pencil, Anis often asked her students (in Bahasa Melayu) to put themselves in the position of the characters to elicit their feelings but she did not further exploit this either in writing or in speaking. She felt her students were not capable of expressing themselves effectively enough in English. Connecting texts with the students’ personal worlds often makes the reading experience more meaningful (Moody in Brumfit, 1983; Ibsen, 1990) and this may motivate new literature students. Though this connection was not explored in depth by their teacher, the students could strongly relate to what was read and thus their interests throughout the reading was maintained.
Jane also briefly elicited her students' feelings and experiences in connection to what was read. Unfortunately, the voices of her students who were fully capable of expressing their views and feelings were either not explored or they were dismissed much too early to make way for other discussions (see Appendix L for lesson transcript). Hence, the students' brewing interest on the topic died when it could have been developed into thoughtful and perhaps self-revealing discussions based on the experiences and feelings evoked. The teacher was also denied the opportunity to find out what actually motivated or demotivated her students to read (Protherough, 1989). Their aesthetic experience (Rosenblatt, 1985) with the texts was not consciously explored.

4.3 Students' Responses to the Selected Literary Texts

The students' responses towards the selected literary texts were probed into during the teacher and student interviews, as well as examined based on classroom observations. Apart from genre preferences, three other overarching themes emerged in the findings revealing the students' perceptions of the selected literary texts from the linguistic and cultural dimensions as well as from what they considered interesting and appealing.

4.3.1 The Linguistic Dimension of Texts

Findings under the linguistic dimension include the words and the form of the text. Anis was relieved that time constraints did not permit her to teach the poem as she "personally [wasn't] so sure what the whole thing meant", having had no experience with literature. Her "poor Kayu Ara kids would have a tougher time just with pronunciation alone", she predicted. Jane, in contrast, felt that her students had no problem with the
texts linguistically. Though some of her students may have found the language especially a Life's Brief Candle rather challenging, they had managed to grasp “the hidden meaning behind the poem”. Her students however complained that they struggled with the poem until it was explained to them. “We knew all the words, but when [they] are together, they make no sense !”, cried Lim Swee. Proficiency in English thus could not fully guarantee that the teachers or the students would comprehend poems despite the ability to 'read'. Life's Brief Candle was perhaps selected to introduce Shakespeare, the icon of the literary world, to the young, new readers of literature. Unfortunately, such a canonical text created an undesired effect among the students as they felt that the language in the poem was irrelevant and unrelated to their everyday lives (Hill, 1986).

The Lake Isle of Innesfree, on the contrary, was a favourite among the high proficiency students. “I like his style . . . the words [in the poem] makes a peaceful and soothing read”, commented Sia Vern. Though this canonical poem proved challenging, the language is very much accessible to the students, unlike Life's Brief Candle. Hence, they were not demotivated by frustration (White, 1975, Hill, 1986).

While the high proficiency students had no linguistic problems with most of the readings, their peers groped and struggled throughout the reading experience. Anis had an extremely challenging task of ‘teaching’ the texts. “It’s difficult enough to get them to understand the words, asking them to interpret the message [was] even impossible. To make things easier, I told them what it all meant”, she described. Kevin and Sue, however, seemed to appreciate this as otherwise they would only be able to understand “a little bit” even if the text was set locally. Had they not been “spoon-fed”, they may have felt great frustration, demotivation or even been demoralised for ‘failing’ to understand.
Thus, language proficiency is still the main barrier or hindrance to appreciating poems for the lower proficiency students, for appreciation comes after understanding. This, and time constraint (Huberman 1974 in Fullan 1991), forced the teacher to maintain her dominant role in class like many teachers of literature (Brown, 1987; Icoz, 1992).

The selected reading texts must cater for the students' language needs. In the study, while the standard text was rather easy and unchallenging in general for the higher proficiency students, the low proficiency students cried that they could hardly read and understand anything without their teacher's help. Ideally, a standard text must not be too challenging thus demotivating low proficiency students (Collie & Slater, 1987) and not too easy that they put off the higher proficiency ones (Protherough 1989, Basturkemen 1990). In reality however, especially in the case of Malaysian classrooms, it is not that easy to have a balanced standard text as far as language needs is concerned. This is even more so especially if the gap between the proficiency levels is too wide. It is even more difficult to teach literature using a set text in a truly mixed proficiency setting. Thus, the minority will have to make way for the interest of the majority, as in Kevin's case.

The poems were also used by the high proficiency students as a springboard for their personal creative expression. The students wrote parallel poems about pollution which matched the tone of A. Samad Said's text (see Appendix M for poems). The mood and tone similar to that of The Lake Isle of Innisfree was expressed by another student in the poem she wrote for her class's newsletter (see Appendix N for poem). Thus, apart from exposing the students to different writers and their writing styles, the literary texts also had quite an impact and influence on the students' writing styles (Gwin, 1990).
4.3.2 The Cultural Dimension of Texts

Based on the assumption that the familiarity of setting, theme and characters could help students to understand and relate to a text, both teachers felt that *The Pencil* was their students’ favourite. This was definitely the case with the Form 1 Ramah students. Anis revealed that her students usually had difficulty in understanding what was read even after it was translated into Bahasa Melayu or explained to them. As a result, they often got restless. “With *The Pencil*, their understanding seemed to be a little better. [Otherwise] they’d wait so patiently”. In the case of these students, their strong interests in the text and the aesthetic transaction (Rosenblatt, 1985) that took place were mainly due to its familiarity to their background knowledge (Hedge, 1987) and the personal connections they had with the text. This, more than the contextual clues embedded in it, was the main factor that enabled the students to read at the level of ‘i + 1’ (Krashen, 1982). The familiarity of local literary texts in promoting successful reading (Krashen, 1982; Kachru in Brumfit & Carter, 1989; Brock, 1990; Hill, 1996) is also evident in the low proficiency students’ responses to *The Dead Crow*. Despite the linguistic difficulties, the students had no problems imagining the setting after the words were explained. The “over-familiarity of the theme pollution” also aided the low proficiency students in understanding what the poet wanted to convey (Hill, 1986).

In contrast, familiarity does seem to ‘breed contempt’ in the case of the ‘high-fliers’ of Form 1 Ceria. The simplicity of the themes presented in *The Pencil* together with the setting and characters to which the students had no problems relating, had failed to draw these students’ interests. “The story insults our intelligence I”, laughed Karl when asked how he felt towards the text, with a strong hint of truth in the joke. He was
referring to the storyline which was too simplistic rather than the simple language used to convey the story. Thus, they were put off reading (Basturkemen, 1990) the text they “babyish” (Protherough, 1989; p. 21). Sia Vern summed up, “Everyday, it’s the same thing, day in day out, we’ve read [similar] stories since [in] primary school during comprehension [lessons]”. It is thus crucial to base the selection of a reading text on the students’ actual interests, and not the teachers’ or what the teachers perceive as interesting for the students (Coady, 1979). Hence, students’ views must at some points be consulted and considered. Although it is important to select a text where its readers have relevant background knowledge (Hirvela and Boyle, 1988), in the case of the high proficiency students in the study, their interests preceded this knowledge.

Jane thought her Form 1 Ceria students enjoyed Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes since the story set in Kelantan was comical and told very colloquially. She assumed that the local setting would aid the students’ appreciation of the satire. She was wrong. Karl found “the story quite confusing and the words too difficult”, referring to the many Kelantanese Malay terms the writer used to describe the people, places and customs. However, their confusion was not entirely caused by the “words”. Although the text read was local, the students were not familiar with the story’s local cultural setting in the first place. The Kelantanese dialect only added to their confusion and unable them to infer from the context, even if they first thought they knew the culture. Despite the arguments for local texts (Goh, 1989), this text only hindered the reading process among these students. Hence, not all local works help promote and facilitate reading and understanding (Hedge 1987) for a setting which is local is not necessarily familiar.

In contrast, the Form 1 Ceria students marveled at the images provoked by The
Lake Isle of Innesfree, a poem set in Ireland. Karl found it very appealing. “I can just imagine the beautiful countryside”, sighed Sia Vern, revealing the personal connections she made with the poem. They both had been to England. The high proficiency students proved to be more familiar, and more ‘at home’ or at ease, with foreign texts than they did with a locally set text. Hence, it is misleading to generally assume that a foreign text is usually unfamiliar to second language students and thus hindering understanding.

The Form 1 Ceria students were satisfied with the balanced selection of local and foreign poems but they felt the short stories should have included some works by non-native writers “such as Roald Dahl!”, to give a variety of flavours instead of narrowing the focus just to Malaysian works. Coming from upper middle class homes, these ‘jet-setting’ students had a wide knowledge of the world and they were also considerably more mature compared to their peers. These two factors clearly influenced their preferences (Kellerman 1981, Icoz 1992). The students, however, sounded content with the knowledge they gained on the writers. “Before this, Shakespeare’s the only name I know from the book”, said Karl. “I didn’t know any Malaysian writers before this…I like Heidi’s [story]”, revealed Sia Vern, indicating a possibility that the computer literate girl might explore the writer’s other work. Hence, the component succeeded to an extent in expanding the students’ knowledge and awareness of the world around them (Stern 1987, Carter & Long 1991), particularly in introducing them to local and foreign writers.

Their peers in Form 1 Ramah, in contrast, expressed strong preferences for local works with local setting for both the poem and short story, though no writers were mentioned in particular. Sue and Kevin admitted of having heard of A. Samad Said before but had never read his works prior to this. Sue found “Malaysian stories like The
Pencil are easy to understand...it is about us” (translated), referring to the familiarity of setting, culture and characters. Local literary works thus provided these low proficiency students with a sense of security through the familiar scene, setting, culture, characters and more importantly, the writers, which is crucial in providing the motivation to read.

Since using a standard set text is necessary for pragmatic reasons however, there thus must be a good balance of both native and non-native literary works, with a variety of themes, to meet the different needs and interests of the students with varying abilities.

4.3.3 Interest and Appeal in Texts

Despite having contrasting backgrounds in terms of upbringing, values and exposure, all the students in the study share one thing in common. The 13-years old adolescents expressed the same tastes and passions for adventure stories. The evergreen appeal of folktales and adventure stories (Bullock Report, 1975; Kellerman, 1981; Hill, 1986) is evident among the young adults. Jane admitted that her students' interests in the only adventure story in the text, How Dalat Got Its Name, was “sky high”. I probed this during the students’ group interview sessions. Karl immediately confessed that it was “the best story compared to the others” for “it's more action packed ... the war and vengeance made it interesting”. This view was strongly echoed by his peers. Sia Vern simply “love[d] the simple way the writer presented the whole story and stories on the traditional way of life”. The setting and the theme, “remind[ed] [Karl] of Asterix”, as he compared the text with his favourite cartoon series of a Viking tribe. Karl and Sia Vern’s ‘fondness’ of the story also reveal the strong aesthetic appeal (Rosenblatt, 1985) of the text. Most of these students who came from middle to high income homes were already
reading independently and extensively, and had been exposed to more sophisticated works for adolescents like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. Thus, their maturity and intellectual ability helped to foster their strong interests and ability to handle the text and its significance (Kellerman, 1981; Icoz, 1992).

Their lower proficiency peers unfortunately did not get to read the story during the literature lessons. However, they admitted when interviewed that these were stories they loved reading most, though the texts read were mostly in their mother-tongue.

Students from both the classes recommended more adventure and horror stories and folk tales in their suggestions for the programme's improvement. While the Form 1 Ceria students wished for more poems on nature, hardships and relationships, their Form 1 Ramah peers wished for more poems on “mothers” and friendships.

### 4.3.4 Genre Preferences

All the Form 1 Ramah students that were interviewed seemed confused between the words ‘short story’ and ‘poem’, either mistaking the latter to be the former or taking the two to mean the same (see Appendix O for interview excerpts). Having clarified the meaning, it was discovered that they preferred reading short stories to poems, as their Form 1 Ceria peers. As Karl put it, “it is easier to understand, there is more to read [so] it lasts longer”. This is perhaps mainly due to the nature of poems which uses similes and metaphors which were perceived to be too complex for these new readers of poetry. It is even harder for lower proficiency readers which thus makes it even more crucial to introduce to these students texts which are suitable to their level of proficiency.
4.4 Teacher-Student Perceptions of the Literature-Based Activities

Throughout the study, teachers’ and students’ perceptions towards the literature-based activities in the language learning classroom were also probed. The following discussion focuses on their perceptions of these activities through several categories. The text dimension will comprise the teacher-student perceptions of the language as well as content of the prescribed texts and their writers, and the actual teaching and learning experiences of the literary pieces as well as the accompanying author biographies. The classroom dimension, on the other hand, will focus on class management and the teacher-student perceptions of time and examination pressures.

4.4.1 Language of the Prescribed Literary Texts

Both teachers in the study shared the same view that the language of the text “[did] not do justice for the low proficiency students” as it was far too difficult. On the other hand, they felt that while the poems were accessible for the higher proficiency readers, the language of the short stories was unchallenging for these students.

The high proficiency students, when interviewed, tried to be modest by saying that although they understood most of the texts, they encountered some problems with the Kelantanese dialect in Of Bunga Telur and Bally Shoes. In contrast, the low proficiency students confided that if it were not for their teacher’s explanation, they would not have understood The Pencil and The Dead Crow, the only texts they had time to read. They seemed hesitant and embarrassed to reveal how going through each line meant a great struggle for them and how they depended totally on Anis to make sense of what was read.

The use of one standardized text to cater for a range of linguistic needs and
proficiencies nationwide thus prove to be the biggest obstacle to pushing the students to higher levels of reading. In selecting a set text, it is almost impossible to strike a balance between the two ends of the scale as far as the students' linguistic needs are concerned, without sacrificing the needs of any proficiency group. The task is especially difficult since English is not just a second language but often a first or a foreign language with most Malaysian learners. Their self esteem, morale and motivation are also affected by the use of one standardised text. A mismatch between their needs and what is prescribed could prove damaging as it may deter rather than encourage them from being readers.

The study found that it was even more difficult to cater to the linguistic needs of each student using the standardised text in a mixed ability class. Unfortunately for Kevin, the only student articulate in English in the class, his needs had to make way for the needs of the majority of his peers. Hence, in a large mixed-ability class such as this, it was impossible for the teacher to cater for every need. As a result, sacrifices are made.

4.4.2 Familiarity with the Prescribed Literary Texts and Authors

Familiarity with texts is an asset to teachers of literature. While Jane seemed confident with the knowledge of the texts as well as the writers having been trained in the field, Anis was extremely nervous. Her nervousness was not just due to the fact that she had not been trained in literature, but because she personally was not an avid reader. "Of course I've heard of Shakespeare and A. Samad Said, but that's all! I know nothing of their work [and off] the others!", she cried.

While both teachers were satisfied over the balanced selection of local and foreign poets, Jane felt that the short stories should include some works of foreign writers to cater
to the linguistic and intellect demands of high ability students. Anis, though, was content with the works of local writers “for a start”, fearing for her low proficiency students as foreign literary pieces would usually mean linguistically more challenging texts.

Although none of the students were familiar with the texts, the high proficiency readers had heard of Shakespeare. Karl had even read and seen the play “Macbeth”. In general, the high proficiency students were satisfied with the exposure the texts had given them towards the works of local and foreign writers and towards the life and culture in “other parts of the world”, Kelantan and Sarawak including. This raises the point that the local could sometimes also be culturally foreign. A handful of the low proficiency students, in contrast, had heard of only one writer, A. Samad Said. While the low proficiency students hoped for more works by local writers in future, their high proficiency peers did, however, suggest to include the works of more foreign writers.

Not only does the use of one set text seem unsatisfactory in catering for students’ varying linguistic needs, it sometimes does not prove to be intellectually stimulating for some students. While the low ability students felt secure with local literary pieces, their more proficient peers sometimes found such texts mundane and uninteresting. For them, the novelty of encountering new cultures through literary texts was more appealing.

4.4.3 The Teaching and Learning of the Literary Texts

The teaching and learning of literature in the two classes were greatly influenced by teacher confidence as well as the students’ linguistic needs as perceived by their teachers.

Jane was confident enough about how to teaching the literary texts but Anis was extremely uncertain of what direction to head. She said, “I simply taught [literature] like
the other comprehension lessons ... most of [the teachers] do ... what else do you expect us to do ?". Lack of teacher-support, both in materials and training, appeared to cause Anis's concern. Thus, she applied her own interpretation of what was 'expected' of her in the component's implementation. Such a lack of teacher confidence could hinder the achievement of the component's objectives as a lack of training and information had led the confused teacher (Schon, 1971 in Fullan, 1991) to use new curriculum materials without a change in teaching approaches (Fullan, 1991).

Although the high proficiency students found Jane's explanation of the texts clear, they felt the reading and learning process would have been more meaningful (Ibsen, 1990) if they were given more "projects or even group work" instead of the "boring workbook exercises". This group of creative and bright students would have been able to handle such tasks, having compiled and printed their own class newsletter. The newsletter, which was an expression of their thoughts, also revealed the students' capability to handle authentic literary tasks (see Appendix P for newsletter cartoon segment).

Among Anis's low proficiency students, while Kevin wished for more interactive group work, the others were content with the cloze-texts, comprehension questions and teacher-dominated lessons (Brown 1987, Salasar 1992). Since Sue's English proficiency was lower comparatively, her preference for this activity was perhaps due to the sense of security of the definite 'right or wrong' nature of the answers expected. It was unfortunate that their teacher did not realise that personal responses need not just be verbally expressed. Low proficiency students could be asked to express their personal responses through art and drama just as effectively, as was evident in the sketches or cartoons by the Form 1 Ceria students in their newsletter. Such activity is crucial in
inviting the new readers of literature to express their thoughts creatively (Collie & Slater 1987) while at the same time not demotivating them with the pressure of having to produce formal written work.

In general, the absence of meaningful interactive activity denied these teachers the golden opportunity of exploiting their students' interests and appreciation of the texts (Greenwood 1988). It also denied the students the opportunity to bridge the knowledge from what was read to the real world (Edwin 1992) and their own life experiences.

4.4.4 The Teaching and Learning of Author Biographies

Despite the focus of the programme on the literary work, both teachers felt compelled to teach their students about the lives of the authors. Although Jane had considerable knowledge on the writers, she was uncertain of what to do with the biography section contained in the text compilation. She thus told her students "about the writers' other works [and] how the writers' work was influenced by their surrounding" from what she could gather from their biographies. Anis however, merely had the biographies read. She "was not sure what to tell them about Ali Majod and A. Samad Said", the authors of the two texts her class managed to read. These teachers were clearly uncertain as to how to deal with the biographies. They were under the impression that such relevant extrinsic information would help their students to understand the text better and familiarity with the authors might have led students to be independent readers of the writers' other works. However, this did not occur. The students did not read the authors' other works extensively on their own.
4.4.5 Class Management

While Jane found her students attentive and co-operative, Anis found it difficult to get her students to “behave” while reading *The Dead Crow*. The student interviews, however, revealed that these students with contrasting proficiencies actually felt restless in their literature lessons, but their restlessness were handled in contrasting manners.

Jane was not aware that the small discussions and the silence or chorus answers thrown at their teacher were a strong indication of the restlessness felt by the high proficiency students. She felt her students’ posed “no problem[s]” during the lessons and were all following and “contributing” to them.

Her students revealed that they actually felt “obliged to listen” to their teacher, although unfortunately, they felt that most of the things discussed were things they already had the knowledge of, especially the discussion on the written work that was previously given to them. Thus, they “pretended to listen just to be polite”, revealed Karl.

Anis felt “lucky” that her low proficiency students felt ‘connected’ to *The Pencil* and thus were unusually attentive in class. With *The Dead Crow*, however, she found difficulty in maintaining their attention for they were restless, more talkative and playful, and less co-operative comparatively. These behavioral problems were similar to the ones she faced in the English Language lessons. Anis expressed her exasperation and frustration as she predicted that most of the readings would receive similar reactions from the low proficiency readers. The students rationale for ‘misbehaving’, despite having the poem being explained in Bahasa Melayu, was they found its theme simply “boring”.

Student-centered lessons that provide meaningful personal engagement with the reading texts proved crucial for students of all levels of proficiencies as they helped to
maintain their interests and attention in the texts. The restlessness felt by Jane’s students was as a result of not being intellectually challenged by the teacher dominated lessons. In Anis’s case, such activities may have boosted her passive students’ interests in *The Dead Crow* as they would feel ‘involved’.

Among Anis’s rationale for not conducting any interactive group or pair activities was she feared her students may “get out of control” and thus valuable teaching hours would be lost. Since “the students will be talking in their own mother-tongue anyway”, she wondered if it was worth the effort. It would be ideal if teachers could have students, to communicate fully in English during group activities. However, since the use of their own mother-tongue proved the first step to giving the low proficiency students the confidence to speak up in public about a given academic task, its use seemed justified.

### 4.4.6 Pressure of Time and Examination

Both teachers felt pressured by the number of texts their students were expected to read in the given time and it was obvious that the teachers’ main anxiety was to cover the texts for the final exam more than anything else.

Jane’s main concern was “the students’ full understanding of the texts read”. Thus, she resorted to interpreting the texts for them. Her anxiousness to prepare them for the examination resulted in her giving comprehension exercises that were knowledge-oriented and based on the ‘right’ answer. Jane also put the blame on time constraints which, according to her, discouraged her from allowing the students to work in groups or on projects. Jane also expressed her anxiety towards her students’ attitude towards literature in relation to other academic subjects. She felt that the component was not
viewed as important as Maths was in the eyes of these examination-oriented students so that “getting the students [ready] would take close to ten minutes if the previous Maths teacher [left] written work on the board”.

The pressure was greater for Anis, who was teaching a low proficiency class and who had no formal training in literature. She was trying to “teach” at least a poem and a short story for the exam since the students’ proficiency was too low, but she expressed anxiety that it took her more than ten lessons of “reading” just one short story, *The Pencil*, with her students. Anis felt she “could not afford to waste [any] time” on interactive group activities. Thus, time constraints and fear for her students’ performance in the examination, rather than class management, seemed to be the main influential factor for Anis not using any student-centered activities while the text was being read.

The teachers in the study felt extremely pressed for time (Huberman 1974) as a result of the examination-oriented school culture that they saw no real necessity for spending time on interactive activities. The absence of such activities denied the students the opportunity to explore and interact with the text (Collie & Slater, 1987) which, in turn, affected the quality of their appreciation (Moody in Brumfit, 1983) and the literary transaction (Rosenblatt, 1985; Ibsen, 1990) between students and the reading text. This examination anxiety due to time constraints was made worse, especially in Anis’s case, by the lack of teacher-support. Furthermore, as a result of being pressured by time and examinations, the focus on the ‘right’ answers and teachers’ interpretation was dominant in both literature classes, one feature so typical of a literature lesson (Brown 1987, Salasar 1992). Hence, time constraint faced by teachers is another factor which needs to be considered as it influences the success of the literature component. The number of
texts to be covered must also be realistic if the reading texts are to be standardised, although ideally they should also match the students' proficiency levels.

Jane's high proficiency students certainly did not feel that more time ought to be spent to prepare them for the examination. In fact, they were quite confident of "scoring" in the English Language examination, although it would be their first taste of the literature component's paper. Such confidence was perhaps a result of the over-exposure to examination-oriented questions through their workbook or written exercises.

However, the 'high fliers' felt that too much time was "wasted" in class just to "get through the readings". Each text was read or explored at least four times: while reading on their own and with their class, while discussing the answers to the written exercises and finally during Jane's cross-comparison of texts in teaching them setting. They felt that they could have done a lot more with the texts given the time and encouragement.

One student commented that though she loved reading the texts, the discussion on setting was very confusing. To the other high proficiency students, it was plain boring. This implies that the teaching of micro features of a literary text should be conducted more subtly and contextualised within the reading of the text itself.

Anis's low proficiency students, in contrast, felt "scared" and desperate at the thought of the examination. They were "scared" as they did not know what to expect, especially if the questions were based on a text they did not have time to cover. They were desperate as they knew that their chances of passing were extremely slim, "as usual". The text's linguistic difficulty was way beyond their proficiency level, and thus success was just not made possible for them. It was unfortunate that the budding interests of the new readers of literature was "killed" by the assessment on their knowledge of the
text rather than their experience with the text.

Ironically, the school’s final English Language Paper for Form 1 created a small-scale controversy as there were two contrasting ‘school of thoughts’. While one group of teachers argued that the questions were too simple for higher proficiency students, the other group felt that such questions would give the low proficiency students a chance to “perform better” (see Appendix Q for examination questions). The questions merely tested the students’ comprehension and not their interpretations and personal responses. Hence, it was not assessing one of the primary objectives of the component’s introduction, which is to encourage personal responses to the literature. However, as an introduction to first time readers of literature, these students should be given question-types they were familiar with as this would help especially in motivating and boosting the morale of the low proficiency students in the long run. Teachers, too, must be specifically briefed on which literary aspect to focus the questions on so that there is a standardised expectation among teachers.

4.5 Conclusion

The findings of the eight week study conducted in two multi-ethnic Form 1 Literature in English classes in an urban co-ed school in Petaling Jaya reveals certain trends in the teaching and learning of literature. A critical backdrop framing the quality of these experiences are, however, the student perceptions and the teacher perceptions of the Literature in English Component. The dissatisfaction of teachers regarding the dissemination of information for the component’s implementation, including training and teacher support filtered through in their practice.
In the teaching of literature in the two classes, the importance of teacher preparation was evident: Jane who had a background in literature was more confident in interpreting the texts while Anis was nervous and unsure about the exploration of text. They also had to deal with the practical constraints of the day to day learning such as the time factor and examination preparations. The chapter also examined student responses to the literary texts through cultural and linguistic dimensions, their interest and appeal as well as genre preferences. Finally, the teacher-student perceptions of the literature-based activities were explored, revealing their reactions of the teaching and learning experiences.