CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Since the inception of the New Primary School Curriculum in 1982, remedial teaching has become an integral component in classroom instructions. Students with learning problems have since been a concern to academicians, those involved in the national education system and other concerned parties or stake-holders. Essentially, these students need their teachers’ intervention so that their capabilities and potentials are nurtured and realised.

The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He or she shall be given an education which will promote his or her general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities … to become a useful member of society.

(Bulletin of UNESCO 1989:2)
Problem of the ESL teacher

A pervasive problem that many ESL teachers have to overcome in the ESL classroom is how to make reticent learners responsive in the language classroom. Presently, increased attention is being given to language learners and their perspectives. Consequently, the current challenge in second and foreign language teaching is to provide students with a learner centred classroom environment. In this context, unravelling the attitudes and perceptions of reticent learners towards language learning would enable language teachers to understand their predicament, and to find effective strategies to enhance their learning (Tan, 1999).

Background of an Earlier Study

An earlier study conducted by Tan (1999) in a National Secondary School in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. A group of reticent students, comprising nine boys and three girls of a form one class was identified, and became the sample of the study. The study was based on a line of inquiry, on building the self esteem of the sample group through non-stressful language activities incorporated into the ESL lessons. It was also inspired by Krashen’s suggestion that an individual’s degree of self esteem is highly related to language anxiety.
... the more I think about self-esteem, the more impressed I am with the impact. People with low self-esteem worry about what their peers think; they are concerned with pleasing others.

(The Modern Language Journal 75, 1991)

About the Sample Group

The sample group had their primary education in vernacular schools, namely Chinese and Tamil schools. All of them were either classmates or schoolmates in their respective schools but are now classmates in this secondary school they attend. Their socio-economic background ranged between low and middle-income group. The Chinese students live in a predominantly Chinese community while their Indian counterparts come from an Indian neighbourhood.

Dominant languages spoken at home were Mandarin and the other dialects for the Chinese students, while only Tamil was spoken in the Indian homes. In the school environment, the same languages were spoken with friends of similar ethnic background inside and outside the classroom. The National language served as a functional language being used in interactions with friends of different ethnic group and consultation with teachers. English was hardly spoken by this group of learners.

On their academic achievements, a majority of them fall below the average category, scoring between the 40 and 49 marks or below.
Methodology and Outcome

The study was conducted based on the action research methodology, where the sample group undergoes a few cycles of the procedure. Sources of data were derived from informal interviews, learners' oral feedback, observation by the researcher during the study, journal entries and the reading materials used.

The outcome of this study had to a great extent achieved its objectives. They included: learners' positive outlook of themselves, ability to articulate short spontaneous responses, motivated, responsible for their own learning and above all, being able to enjoy English Language lessons as expressed by their overt behaviours.

Thus from the pedagogical point of view, these learners were ready to develop their language skills further, through the acquisition of the reading skills.

What the National Survey Revealed?

In 1996, the National Literacy Survey was carried out by the National Library (Sunday Star, August 1999). Revelation of the reading habits of Malaysians sent shock waves throughout the education fraternity and concerned communities of society. The "only two books read in a year" statistic was most appalling to the Ministry of Education, the "Guardian Angel" of the Malaysian education system.
In retrospect, the findings proved that reading activities and campaigns re implemented in schools had been futile and ineffective. An alternative programme was immediately drawn up (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca - its acronym NILAM) and prescribed to all primary and secondary schools in the country, in May 1998. The Ministry of Education’s quick response to the predicament clearly indicated the importance of establishing the reading habit among our school children in the primary and secondary schools so that they will become lifelong readers.

However, a year after its implementation, no feedback was available regarding its progress. According to a newspaper report (Sunday Star, August 1999) many schools did not carry out the programme for reasons which included insufficient reading resources, the programme being too comprehensive and idealistic or not enough staff or manpower. Probably at this stage of its implementation, the Ministry of Education being responsible for this programme should obtain feedback from schools in order to get a true picture of its progress and development.

Recent Policy Changes; My Perspective

As a teacher, I lauded the efforts by the Ministry of Education in promoting reading in schools. While the objectives and aims of such activities were pragmatic for the more proficient readers, to the less competent readers these objectives would
remain an illusion. It is undeniable that reading runs out of these students favour compared to the impact of electronic and media distractions. Hence, to overcome this competition between reading and electronic inventions, these students would need a lot of motivation to get them pick up reading as a leisure pursuit. With less proficient learners, the task would be more demanding and challenging.

The Ministry of Education in its capacity to promote and inculcate the reading habit amongst our school goers, has recently taken a bold move to include literary component in the English Language Curriculum for secondary schools in the year 2000, beginning with the first and fourth formers.

The endorsement of English literature in the English Language Curriculum will no doubt supply meaningful context to which students can relate and remember. Literary texts make contacts with ‘the learners’ own life’s experiences that are shared, applied and learnt. Hence, “literary texts speak directly to the learner, to his heart and his mind, therefore making learning more personal, meaningful and creative” (Brumfit and Carter, 1986).

The question now is, how could low proficiency learners who lack background reading experiences and motivation, be able to interact and appreciate literary works? Obviously, what is essential and necessary for this group of learners are strategies to enhance their reading abilities and also to find purpose and meaning such as reading for enjoyment.
Statement of the Problem

A random survey on the reading habits of ESL learners from vernacular schools (Forms Remove to Two) in Kelana Jaya Secondary School in Petaling Jaya (Tan, 1999) revealed an appalling majority who do not read English books or other materials. Factors contributed to this negative reading attitudes include lack of reading experience and interest, motivation, language guidance, home and social background and unawareness of the pleasures and benefits of reading English books.

Although one of the aims of the English Language programme in both the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia is to provide:

"An additional means of access to academic, professional and recreation materials"

(Introduction, English Language Syllabus Handbook 1988 PPK Ministry of Education)

The random survey indicated that a significant proportion of Remove and Form one pupils have failed to acquire reading skills for academic or recreation purposes. Unfortunately if reading is not nurtured at this point of their school life, then they would never discover the benefits and joy of reading.

For this group of low proficiency learners, English is the third language after Chinese and the National language (Bahasa Malaysia). In addition, most of them perceive reading negatively i.e. difficult or no fun. Therefore if their reading ability and
perception about reading are not changed, then the inclusion of literature into the English Syllabus in secondary schools would be counter-productive, creating a group of reluctant and resistant ESL readers!

The need for teacher intervention to their reading problems is of paramount importance if we want to improve their education.

**Research Questions**

1. How can I help a selected group of low proficiency learners enjoy reading?

2. What particular reading strategies work for these low proficiency ESL learners?

3. To what extent can reading improve the writing of these learners.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is aimed at helping low proficiency learners enjoy reading through manageable reading materials. It also focused on some strategies that learners can use to improve reading comprehension.

Therefore it is hoped that this study would contribute knowledge to teachers, school resource centres and policy makers about the type of books conducive and effective for less competent readers. The efficacy of prescribing books according to age
group is not practical because reading competence does not grow with age but rather is influenced by environmental factors. As such, using children’s picture books for poor readers in secondary school should not be a taboo.

In addition, this study also provides teachers with an understanding of why low proficiency learners fail to read and how teachers can assist them overcome their reading problems. The strategies implemented in this study can be adopted, modified or extended to suit the teachers and their learners because no two schools would have exactly the same situation or problems.

Finally, this study also contributes to the question of using authentic materials in ESL education, in particular literature. Authentic text means using works of literature that are as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom context. But how could low proficiency learners cope with such text when they lack literary experience and competence. Therefore this study raises the need to review text appropriate to the competence of our learners and not what text they should read.
Rationale: Scope and Limitations of the Study

The rationale for the case study approach is that it allows the researcher to learn about the reading habit, perception and problems faced by the informants when reading in the target language. This detailed input is crucial and essential as it provides basis for planning the course of action to be taken by the researcher.

Secondly, the case study approach allows the researcher to interact with the informant while reading. In this way, the informant's comprehension and strategies used could be checked and reinforced.

This study did not examine whether or not the positive reading motivation of the informants at the end of the ten-day study could be sustained. Neither did it look at the availability of reading materials which low proficiency learners can have access to in the school. The study was limited to enhancing the learners' reading ability so that they could find enjoyment in reading. As such the scope of the study is purely confined to reading for pleasure and fun. Another limitation of the study was that only two informants were used as samples. The findings therefore cannot be a representation of all low proficiency learners of the same age group and similar background.