

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0. Statement of Problem**

This section looks at why this study was undertaken. It discusses the problems that prompted the study and the background against which the study is set. I will also discuss the rationale and significance of the study. Any limitations will also be looked at.

Students who opt to take literature in English as an elective for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination, encounter the subject for the first time in form four. While they have been exposed to literature through the Class Readers' programme, where the text is used as a means to learn the language, they have not been exposed to the more sophisticated techniques of looking at the text more closely for its value laden meaning.

Explicating a literary text requires specialised skills and a sensitivity for the abstract. However, the majority of students who are streamlined for the literature in English elective face the greatest difficulty processing information found in the text the way students of literature are supposed to. The result is often apprehension and anxiety, which sometimes causes the students to abandon the subject midway. It is not surprising that the number of students who choose to study this subject is dwindling and the numbers continue to drop each year.

What makes this subject so formidable that students lose confidence in studying it? Could it be that the subject matter itself is beyond the competence level of the students? Could it be that the student's learning strategies are inadequate? Could it be attributed to the ineffective teaching methods of the teacher?

Having taught literature in English in my present school for a year, I am of the belief that the difficulty faced by the students could be due to a combination of factors. As it is not possible to investigate all the problems in one study, this study will focus on the learning strategies of students. This study is undertaken on the premise that if students are given guidance and training in thinking skills, it will allow students to handle this subject with more confidence and conviction. The thinking skills, which are acquired, will not only be useful for learning this subject but for other subjects as well. Thus, the long-term repercussions of mastering such thinking skills can be most heartening, satisfying and far-reaching.

### 1.1 Literature in the KBSM

In the upper secondary school curriculum (KBSM), literature in English is offered as an elective to students of Form 4. With the introduction of the open certificate concept, the students in this form are free to take a combination of electives from an array of six packages. This means that under this system, a student is free to take up to a maximum of 10 subjects if she so chooses and a science student can now choose to do a subject like literature in English, which was traditionally in the Arts domain.

Literature in English as a discipline is not entirely new to students. They would have been introduced to English literature via the Class Readers' Programme, which is compulsory in all forms. Nevertheless, there is a big difference in the teaching/learning of literature in English and English literature. McRae (1991) refers to the latter as literature in English, (literature with the small 'l') which is used for the sole purpose of learning and improving the students' English language.

Literature in English, on the other hand, calls for the explicit and detailed study of selected texts. The texts, which are predetermined by the Ministry of Education are studied over a three year cycle. For the period of 1999 – 2000, students have to study 16 poems which are enveloped within two themes, three out of six short stories, one out of three novels and one out of three dramas. The complete list of the different genres is given in Appendix 1. The students are guided through an appreciation of the literary text to extract meaning and to make informed responses. In teaching this subject, the teacher takes on a more significant role because there is a shift in focus and emphasis. The study now 'calls for the teachers to lead students to an awareness of how literary text codifies its meaning and challenges the reader to react to its themes and representations of human experiences.' (Murdoch, 1992. p. 2 ). While the teacher, who has training in this subject, may have the expertise to teach the subject, the subject in itself makes certain demands of students which can be either exciting or frustrating (depending on the proficiency level of students). Students, therefore, have special needs that a discerning teacher of literature must take heed of.

It is within this context that this study is undertaken. Therefore, an investigation into what these special needs might be would merit some attention.

## **1.2. The needs of students taking Literature in English as a discipline**

In looking for better ways to help students cope with the demands of learning a new subject, we need to be mindful of the problems faced by the students. As mentioned earlier, literature in English would be a new subject to the students in form four. As such,

some the problems as outlined by Lazar (1993) would include inadequate reading strategies, making interpretations, understanding the cultural background of the story and problems with comprehension and appreciating the style. To overcome these problems the students need coping strategies by which they can overcome these problems. One of the ways would be to equip them with adequate thinking skills.

Teaching this subject does not only constitute helping the students to decipher the text but, it in fact, also goes further in providing the students the means and skills that are necessary in helping them understand the texts. This process of building and guiding students to explain, illustrate, criticise and expound upon the given texts requires the active and alert participation of students and a carefully laid methodical plan of action on the part of the teacher to draw upon the experience and background knowledge of the students. While students may be guided and taken through the paces of explicating a text through various means, ultimately the task of writing out accurate and relevant answers rests on the individual student. Students need to be taught specific thinking skills, to be independent in their endeavour to deal with given texts.

These students, therefore, should not be looked upon as empty containers waiting to be filled with knowledge by the teacher - a concept espoused by Nuttall (1982). Instead, the teacher should expand her role as a facilitator and guide, to steer the students through various tasks and activities while at the same time moulding and building the necessary skills that will help students. These skills, once internalised will become second nature to them. As Icoz (1992) puts it, once the students have acquired the means of entering the author's imagined world, the universality of the themes, the significance of the experiences recounted, and the relevance to the students' own life of the ideas, events,

and emotions dealt with in the work will inevitably arouse their interest and motivate them. This stage will no doubt see the students making it out on their own or becoming independent learners. The achievement of this stage will no doubt be a rewarding and fulfilling experience for both the guide and the steady plodder.

### 1.3 Objectives of the study

My primary objective in carrying out this study was to present to interested teachers an alternative to the banking model of teaching or 'money-in, money-out concept' (Freire, 1997) which is, in fact, what is usually the trademark of many teachers during the teaching of literature in English. Some of the assumptions behind the banking model of teaching that Bartlett (in Fien, Gerber & Wilson, 1989) presented was that the teacher teaches and the students are taught. The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing. The teacher thinks and the students are thought about. The teacher talks and the students listen ~~to~~ meekly and the teacher is the subject of the learning process while the students are mere objects.

In carrying this study, I aim to dispel the above assumptions. The main objectives of my study, then, would be:

- 1) To find an alternative to the banking concept.
- 2) To bring students to the forefront of learning literature.
- 3) To define ways by which students can be taught the necessary thinking skills which will enable them to work through a given text, competently and independently.

An effective teaching/learning environment requires the full and active participation of students and active strategising and reflection on the part of the teacher. Therefore the objective of this study is to define and realise these roles.

#### 1.4. Significance of the study

This study, I believe is significant, because it looks at ways by which an effective teaching/learning environment can be nurtured. One of them is to examine those obsolete beliefs and practices that not only retard the natural development of students' own learning but unwittingly force students to be dependent on handouts from the teacher which in turn spurns the beliefs that students are unthinking objects that have to be fed and nourished by the teacher. I believe this cycle will continue so long as there is no conscious effort to break it.

Another reason for this study is that within the classrooms, the teacher has the onerous task of implanting in the students the spirit of critical appreciation and inquiry so that they will turn out to be responsible, thinking adults who can weather the changing moods of time. The rapid pace by which the world is evolving and the split second dissemination of information requires individuals to be able to decipher this onslaught of information so as to keep abreast with the changing times. The classroom must be a place where the seeds of healthy inquiry needs to be germinated.

One of the most suitable medium for cultivating and developing thinking skills among students is through literature. Literature makes special demands on the students cognitive abilities quite unlike the other subjects that the students are exposed to. What these demands are will be dealt with in detail in chapter two. As literature deals with the human side of things, most if not all issues we deal with, are concerned with such

matters. This study looks at ways by which thinking skills can be developed through a conscious and deliberate effort by using Literature in English as the vehicle. This calls for identifying the thinking skills required by the students. Then, identifying effective ways by which they can be taught these skills so that they become competent. ( Spiro in Brumfit, 1991) They are also required to develop abilities such as reasoning, inferring, evaluating, differentiating facts and opinion and a host of other abilities.

The skills to be taught will be monitored to see their effectiveness. If the results are positive, it is an indication that these thinking skills need to be incorporated into teaching of literature and are therefore relevant in any literature programme.

#### 1.5. Rationale of the Study

Compared with subjects like Mathematics and Science, the general consensus is that literature is a discipline that does not require the rigorous use of the intellect.. As such it is often relegated to a lower status. This misconception needs correction and a conscious effort is needed from all concerned to dispel such lop-sided views. The case for the study of literature has been accepted and acknowledged and encouraged universally. It would be tragic if this subject is done away with in preference of other subjects.

This study is undertaken with the aim of expanding interest in the study by injecting new and exciting ways of exploring and unearthing the products of great thinkers and teachers of all ages. Literature stipulates that students apply the logical and rational methods to a vast range of problems. This calls for accurate perception, precise interpretation of language and making sound judgements (Murzano et al ,1988). Through

literature students learn to respect facts, establish the evidence for an opinion and recognise fallacious argument. (Probst, 1994). Whole communities of peoples need to be groomed to be sensitive and sensible individuals which would go a long way in building a peaceful and harmonious society. There is no better place to nurture such individuals than in the classroom and especially through the literature lessons.

Students of Literature can optimise their learning if they are equipped with the right knowledge and skills. Ideally, this would be a situation where the students have within them the expertise to explicate any given text using a combination of thinking skills. However, because students of literature have not been trained in thinking skills, the teacher assumes the burden of explaining and deciphering the prescribed text to the students. A teacher who is aware of the need to equip students with thinking skills, will also know that without it, it can have very negative ramifications on learning outcomes.

This project will identify the particular thinking skills needed by students of literature. I will also look at ways by which these skills can best be disseminated to students. The thinking skills will not only be beneficial for the immediate needs of the students but there is a genuine possibility that they will remain a lifelong gain.

## **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

Literature in English comprises four genres: poetry, short stories, novel and drama. It would indeed be useful and worthwhile to explore the possibility of developing thinking skills in all the four genres. Nevertheless, such a venture would result in a mammoth collection of data which would require much time and effort to sort, organise and synthesise. While such a venture maybe laudable it is nonetheless a gargantuan task



for just a single researcher to handle. Lack of time and resources are among the foremost constraining factors.

This project is therefore confined to a small area. I will be carrying out an action research whereby a literature class is taught the recommended thinking skills. The students are observed during this period of time to record the effectiveness or the defects of the lessons and more importantly to see to what extent the thinking skills have made an impact on their understanding and interpretation of the text.

The study will look at one genre, that is the novel. The novel in question is Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. It is one of the three texts which are to be studied by the students in form four taking literature in the 1998/2000 cycle.

Another limitation that needs mentioning is that instead of exploring the whole novel in detail, only relevant portions will be looked at. This again is due to the sheer length of the novel which would place a high demand on the researcher's time and labour.

The class in which the study is to be carried out is my form five literature class. I have taught this class for the past one year and so their abilities and their weaknesses are familiar to me. The action research study is confined to the realms of this class only. To further facilitate my study, selected students will be called upon to be key informants. As a novice in the field of action research, some shortcomings on my part may be inevitable.

## 1.7 Conclusion

Any study undertaken to explore ways of teaching thinking skills will surely be endorsed and welcomed by teachers of literature at this point in time, especially when the emphasis placed on this aspect is at an all time high. This is especially so since there has been a directive to incorporate thinking skills in all subjects in all schools. A sample list is given in Appendix 2.

While the teaching of thinking skills may be nothing new, to actualise the teaching of thinking skills requires a careful and concerted planning on the part of the teacher. Otherwise these thinking skills will merely remain a mention in the record books with little action ever taking place. This study is therefore seen as useful and relevant in meeting the demands of the curriculum, the needs of the students and the realisation of some of the educational goals.