CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to investigate how motivational techniques can aid in improving college students' reading skills. The section below provides the background, statement of the problem, purpose and significance of the study.

1.1   Background to the study

Many students who enter post-secondary institutions do not display advanced literate behaviors and are therefore underprepared to function successfully in an academic context (Wyatt, 1992). These students face difficulties in comprehending their academic reading materials. As a result, these students are unable to function beyond a basic literacy level within this context (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986). Chall (1983:4) notes that "although students demonstrate gains in reading during the early years, these gains seem to taper off in the middle and upper grades, and decline during the high school years". At the university level, it is important for students to learn to adjust to their purposes of reading to meet their academic expectations. College teachers are often faced with how to assist the students to become better readers within their academic settings. To help students to become better academic reader, it is necessary for the teacher to develop appropriate classroom dynamics (Spires, Huffman and Huntley-Johnston, 1993) and assist them in constructing knowledge.

However, creating a learning environment for a lesson requires considerable planning and flexibility on behalf of the teacher (Ryder and Graves,

1998). Some students do complain that their classes are irrelevant, not related to what they believe is important in preparing them for the working world. They often feel they are treated as children, only taking in the learning without being given adult responsibilities. As a result, they are often unmotivated to learn and view education as a compulsory process imposed by adults, rather than learning to develop their skills and contribute to others. Marzano and Pickering, (1997) affirm that motivation affects students' abilities to learn; when students are motivated to learn they would likely be able to construct their own knowledge so that whatever they have learned is significant to them. Several researchers have suggested a need for educators to have adequate knowledge on theories of motivation in order to have a better understanding how motivation can be a function of factors in the educational setting (Ames, 1992; Keller, 1983). Thus, this signifies the importance of motivation in facilitating learning.

According to Dornyei (1994) motivation is one of the main determinants of second/foreign language learning achievement. Williams (1994) acknowledges that learning a second language (L2) is different to learning other subjects. L2 learning is a complex process (Oxford and Shearin, 1994). The learning of a second language involves more than just acquiring a set of skills such as grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure, because language is an intimate part of social identity (McGroaty, 1997). Williams (1994) concurs that in learning a second language the self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being have a significant impact on the social nature of the

learner of a second language. Crookall and Oxford (1988:136) concede that "Learning a second language is ultimately learning to be another social person."

With these realizations, Gardner's, a social psychologists, approach in language learning became more apparent. Gardner's "socioeducational model" of language learning incorporates cultural beliefs, attitudes and motivation (Gardner, 1985). Gardner defines motivation as consisting of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language. Oxford and Shearin (1994) admit that motivation determines the extent of active, personal involvement in second language (L2) learning. This signifies the role of motivation to facilitate learning in the second language classroom.

In an L2 classroom, reading remains an important skill for students of English as a second language to acquire. Grabe (1996) asserts that reading competence is basically a complex set of abilities that involves many components including grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary; thus, incorporating reading skills in an L2 classroom will enable the students to progress and attain greater development in all academic areas. Reading is a very important skill for any university student who will need to use it to gain access to knowledge in the academic books. In their course of study students are required to read a lot of reference materials in their field of study and use the information to do their assignments. To be able to do this, students must read efficiently and meaningfully.

What then is the role of the teacher in motivating students to read and subsequently facilitate their learning? According to Guthrie (1996), highly

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motivated readers generate their own literacy learning opportunities, and in doing so, they begin to determine their own destiny as literacy learners. As teachers how do we build students' motivation and at the same time help improve students' reading skills? The importance of teaching reading skills to students at higher institutions is often overlooked. On the other hand, teachers may neglect comprehension instruction because they do not really know how to explain or identify comprehension as a cognitive process, and so do not know what comprehension instruction should look like and how it can be implemented (Wendler et al., 1989).

The focus on the needs of individual learners is important today because of the diverse student population in colleges (McKeachie, 1988). Cross (1981) argues that this diversity of students has supported the need for instructional approaches to be more student-centered. Presently, reading in schools is considered as a more receptive and static process (Zamel, 1992). This association has influenced students' perceptions of reading. They view reading as a chore to answer the questions that are in the text rather than making meaning of what they read. Therefore, in approaching reading, teachers need to be familiar with a wide variety of instructional concepts and procedures. College teacher education activities need to provide models of extended strategy instruction, rather than reinforce the notion of mentioning (Durkin, 1979).

At present at the University Sains Malaysia (USM) Perak Campus most of the engineering courses are taught in Bahasa Malaysia but students are required to read extensively in English because most academic references are available only

in English. However, the reading skill is still far from satisfactory among university level students. Asmah (1982) perceives that there are undergraduates who cannot function at all in English, either in reading or in writing short paragraphs. Realizing this, USM has made English language a compulsory subject for undergraduates. The Center of Languages and Translation is given the responsibility to conduct English language proficiency courses. Students take four units of English as one of the requirements for graduating. Students who enter the university are streamed according to their English results in SPM or Matriculation.

In USM, students are required to take Technical English comprising four levels: LKI 160 (Technical English Level I), LKI 260 (Technical English Level II), LKI 360 (Technical English Level III) and LKI 460 (Technical English Level IV). Different language skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing are introduced in the context of authentic texts selected from the engineering discipline. The general objective of the course is to develop students' proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing to a level that would enable them to communicate effectively in both the academic and occupational context. However, the focus of reading is not given a greater emphasis especially in LKI 360 and LKI 460 classroom. The weightage of assessments in this course focuses mainly on the students' oral presentations. It remains uncertain whether this has led to the decline in reading in English.

As teachers it is necessary for us to realize what motivates students to read. It is hoped that this study will provide insight into how motivation affects

learners' language process. It is also hoped that the ESL teachers are able to see motivation from a different perspective instead of only realizing the importance of motivation to learn language successfully. In addition, it is also important for students to have the necessary skills and strategies to achieve their goals. Thus, it is fundamental for teachers to help students to use appropriate strategies and skills when approaching reading in English.

1.2   Statement of the problem

The English language has maintained a nebulous position in the Malaysian education system (Nair, 1994). At present, English is no longer used as a medium of instruction in schools, but is taught in all national schools from Standard one to Form five. At tertiary levels, students are expected to acquire a sufficiently high level of competency in the English language as it is often regarded as an international medium of academic reference.

According to the Prime Minister, to become a full-fledged industrial country, Malaysians need to be proficient in the National Language and English. Asmah (1994) agrees that Malaysia will not be able to strive for excellence through the National Language alone; it has to be assisted by English. To achieve progress and advancement, Malaysians need to acquire the knowledge of science and technology. Often, these books are only available in English.

Tertiary level students are required to read effectively and efficiently authentic technological texts in their course of study. The problem arises when students do not have any experience on how to tackle technological texts or

expository texts in their secondary school curriculum and as a result they are not able to process the technological materials effectively. To be able to understand a text well, students need to be strategic readers. This can be achieved by exposing students to the underlying skills and strategies necessary to handle texts as well as to master the skills by applying them to new and unknown materials. Burron and Claybourgh (1974) argues that any ability or skill that is not sufficiently developed to permit a reader to decode and to comprehend will tend to hinder the person in completing the act of reading, regardless of the nature of the material.

At present, most teachers realize the role of motivation in assisting students to learn. However, in the second language reading classroom, teachers often overlook how and what motivates students to read. Do teachers provide lessons that are relevant to the students' goals and interests? Do students see the value of these lessons? Do we give students reading assignments with interesting and meaningful tasks? Grabe (1996) feels that if students are not motivated to read, they will not develop as fluent readers. Bruner (1966), as cited in Mazano and Pickering (1997), believes that external reinforcement might get a certain behavior performed. Therefore, the role of the teacher is integral to the success of second language readers (Anderson, 1999) and in motivating them to read. My interest in the role of motivation in promoting the reading skill is derived from the belief that teachers play an important role in assisting students develop into life-long readers for both pleasure and academia. Hence there is a need to find out whether using motivational techniques can aid students to improve their reading skills.

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the study

The primary purpose of this study is to evaluate the use of mo
techniques in improving students' reading skills.

Drawing from past research, it is hypothesized that:

1. Motivational techniques positively affect students' abilities in acquiring a second language

2. Students who are highly motivated are better readers.

3. Reading skills can be taught.

4. Good readers have better reading skills than poor readers.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do motivational techniques improve students' reading skills?

2. What are students' perceptions of selected motivational techniques used to motivate and improve their reading skills?

This study is significant in two aspects. First, it provides insight into how reading skills can be improved among college students. Secondly, it offers a different perspective on how motivational techniques can be used as ways to assist students in their reading skills. It is also hoped that recommendations can be made to trainee teachers and curriculum designers to consider motivational techniques as an important element in the reading class. The related findings will facilitate the development of reading instruction in various formal and informal academic settings.