

***'Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body'.  
(Sir Richard Steele 1672-1729)***

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1.0 Introduction**

#### ***1.1 Background***

Reading has always been regarded as a desirable activity for people of all age, be it a small child or an adult. There is no age limit for reading as it is an ongoing process. In fact one should inculcate the reading habit from a young age. Reading is a receptive skill, which is essential for language development. Many students of English as a Second Language (ESL) find reading in English a difficult process, therefore they do not like to read anything in English apart from their required assignments. These students perceive reading as boring, tedious and time consuming. They shy away from reading, as they do not see reading as an interesting activity that can not only fill their pass time but also widen their knowledge. In 1998, our dear Prime Minister, Datuk Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad lamented about the poor reading habits of Malaysians.

*'Although Malaysia has a high literacy rate of 93%, Malaysians have yet to inculcate the reading habits. They only read an average of two books a year, which is considered low.'*

(Business Times, 6<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1998)

His sincere wish was for Malaysians to read more as reading not only enhances one's knowledge but also contributes to personal growth.

Parents and teachers often lament that their children and students tend to while away their time on the Internet instead of reading books. But they fail to realise

that the Internet can be churned into a resourceful channel, which can be used to promote reading habits, which in turn would aid language development. In my study, I am downloading short stories from the Internet and simplifying them according to my students' proficiency level. It is my hope that these stories would motivate students to read more in English, as they stories are quite short and interesting. As such, students would be able to read them in a short span of time.

Reading has been the skill most emphasized in traditional Foreign Language (FL) teaching. Learners are taught reading skills or strategies for understanding elements such as content, textual features, rhetorical elements and cultural background (Fatimah Hashim, 2001). Many researches have been done on skill-based teaching procedures including basic skill like finding the main idea, skimming and scanning, and advanced skills such as schema-building, metacognitive skills (Susser and Robb, 1990). All these skills can be categorised as intensive reading.

According to Barnett (cited in Susser, B & Robb, T.N, 1990), teaching FL students reading strategies 'did not significantly improve their reading comprehension'. Gardner (1985) suggested that these skills and strategies are better regarded as activities involving comprehension than as categories of abilities. Therefore, when we read, we are engaging in activities such as recalling word meanings, inferring, drawing conclusions and so on but these are all aspects of the act of comprehending.

However extensive reading has always been a problem with students and very little is known about 'extensive reading procedure' and its pedagogical aspects or its effectiveness. Students simply do not read enough books to enhance their language

development. They focus more on 'intensive reading' to pass exams than reading for pleasure or reading to broaden their worldview. Therefore in this study, I propose to use an extensive reading programme to motivate ESL learners. My desire to embark on this study rooted when I first began teaching in my present school. I am teaching in a Chinese secondary school whereby 99.5% of the students are of Chinese origin. These students rarely read anything in English except for what is required of them. Therefore it is my hope that these students would be interested in reading extensively and independently after they have undergone this programme.

### ***1.2 Reading***

Reading is a process of giving forms to the words in the text, of connecting our experiences and making sense of the world around us. We need to organise words into thoughts and visualise images in mind to comprehend what we are actually reading. Reading is essential to our everyday life as every day a new book is published and hundreds of articles of new findings by experts are published in journals. Reading is an important 'instrument', which aids learning and enriches experiences and pleasure. Studies have shown that better readers and learners go back about the task of reading more strategically than others do.

Reading is food for mind; reading to know something new, fascinating or even something common as love can be stimulating. Reading is an enriching exercise for the mind and heart and should be an ongoing process in one's life as it provides knowledge as well as personal satisfaction. Often it can provoke one into thinking;

responding silently to someone talking silently. It can be therapeutic for the restless or tired mind.

Reading ability is usually categorised according to ability and they vary according to students' proficiency level. High proficient students would comprehend whatever they read easily. In other words, their digestion level is higher and faster, whereas below average students' digestion level of texts is lower and slower.

Maya Khemlani David (2001) asserts that 'in a setting where English is a second or foreign language, reading in the target language is an important means of learning the target language.' Therefore, the objective of reading educators is to nurture their learners to become independent, strategic readers. Studies have shown that better readers and learners go about the task of reading more strategically than others do. So, they have greater conscious control over what and how they read (Fatimah Hashim, 2001).

Basically there are two types of reading, that is, intensive and extensive reading. Intensive reading is reading done to elicit information and it is also known as efferent reading, whereas extensive reading involves reading for pleasure and satisfaction and widely known as aesthetic reading. According to Constructive Theory, writing and reading are both meaning-making activities (Judith Langer and Sheila Flihan, 1999). Reading is also inter-twined with the other skills, that is, listening, speaking and writing. As such, the more the learner reads, the better he or she will be in his or her command of the language in the areas mentioned above.

Now, with the advancement in Science and Technology and the use of Information Communications Technology (ICT) globally, one cannot deny the

importance of literacy, that is, the ability to read, to enquire information and knowledge to achieve higher academic qualifications or to become skilled persons in their own areas such as become a better educationist by reading a lot on the latest development in teaching pedagogy as well as methodology. According to Rosenblatt (1994), reading as an efferent activity is to focus attention on the information a reader is expected to take away and use during or after reading. It is used for acquiring skills or information. In other words, it is to learn something rather than experience something. When individual reader is involved in efferent reading, they are reading to study it, not to experience it. On the other hand, the aesthetic reading is more for enjoyment and emotional fulfilment. During efferent reading, the reader's focus of attention is on the information the reader will take away from the text, on its more public aspects. In contrast, during aesthetic reading, the reader's focus of attention is a lived-through experience of events, a more private aspect (Mahzan Arshad, 1998). Rosenblatt (1976) concedes that in most reading cases, there are a mix of both stances.

The aim of this study is to examine students' reactions to the stories downloaded and graded from the Internet. It is important to discover if these stories could motivate students to read extensively and their responses in the reading logs, questionnaires and interviews would reveal the answer to this question. Students will be given a chance to adopt the aesthetic stance when they read and respond in their reading logs, which is seldom done in the reading class.

### ***1.3 Learners' Reading Habits***

Even though students are taught English for ten to eleven years from Primary One to Secondary Five or Six, it is not necessary for the students to obtain a pass in it. So, even if students fail in the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) and the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), they can still get through these major examinations.

However, at tertiary level, students need to be proficient in English in order to gain access to academic texts and research materials, the majority of which are in English. Moreover, certain faculties in tertiary level like the Economics Faculty and the Law faculty in University Malaya require students to read and answer the examination questions in English (Maya Khemlani David, 2001). The local universities have made it compulsory for students to pass the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) with a certain band depending on the courses they are undertaking to enter the local universities. If they do not reach the required band before they enter the universities, they have to sit for the examination in the course of their study or they would not be able to graduate. In fact, in University Malaya students are prevented from graduating if they fail to obtain the required grades for their MUET or English Proficiency paper.

Many learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) do not like to read. Learners in Malaysia associate reading to memorising facts or rote-memorization for examinations. Most our students revert to rote-memorization, especially those from vernacular schools, rather than understanding texts and this proves to be a drawback especially when these students continue their tertiary education. According to a study conducted by Martin Cortazzi and Lixian Jin on '*Cultures of Learning*', it was found

that Chinese children are socialized into a particularly long-standing culture of learning at an early age. In the early years of schooling, strong emphasis is given to memory, imitation and repetitive practice and these strategies are likely to be used subsequently in their schooling. There is persistent belief that anyone can achieve success in language learning whether Chinese or English by sheer hard work and this hard work is commonly demonstrated by memorization and practice. This culture is prevalent in Malaysian Chinese too. As such, students face problems when they go for tertiary education as in the universities one is expected to understand texts and apply the knowledge rather than just memorise and answer questions.

Even though the inclusion of the literature component in the English Language Syllabus from the year 2001 for the Lower and Upper Secondary is to be applauded, there are certain drawbacks in the implementation of this programme. Learners' are not given a choice when it comes to selecting the literature texts. The texts are fixed by the Education Ministry and the Text Books Division distributes the books according to their own discretion. For example, even though there is a choice between three novels for Form Three and Form Five students, only one text is sent to the schools.

The interest to read something that is in print is important and can influence and motivate learners to do so. Reading newspapers and magazines are actually efferent reading that is, reading to illicit information. In this study I am looking at reading stories for its aesthetic value. Learners' reading habits and preference for books or materials are influenced by home location, for example no proper library in the neighbourhood, home environment (there is not much book-reading at home or

among relatives and friends), cultural background (English might be considered a foreign language), family income (books are expensive) and motivation to read. Sometimes the school library too might not have new, interesting storybooks due to financial constraints.

Reading skills should be taught to learners in the early stages of a reading programme. Many reading programmes in general adhere strictly to curriculum specification. The reading materials used by the teachers are in accordance with the curriculum specification and the teaching method is normally '*monologic*' or '*formalistic*'. Teachers tend to choose materials that they feel would be of interest to the learners and common exercises such as comprehension questions are used to evaluate the learners' understanding of text. This method of teaching reading might bore proficient learners and lessen the interest of weak learners.

Reading programmes should not be rigid and impose books or texts that do not appeal to teenagers. A reading lesson would be a success if the material connects the readers (his or her schemata – experience) to the outside world or the 'world of the reading text'. Teachers should scaffold the reading process to enable learners to be competent readers. According to the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, 'what a child can do today with assistance, she will be able to do alone tomorrow.' So the aim of teaching should be for tomorrow's development. Learners need to be constantly challenged, supported and encouraged to read. The teacher can do this by building scaffolds to assist his or her readers (Fatimah Hashim, 2001).



#### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

Even though English is given the status of second language in Malaysia, in reality this is not the case. English is treated as a foreign language since to many, if not most, it is not necessary to use English in their everyday life and it is not essential for survival. Students believe that they can survive with their mother tongue and knowledge of Bahasa Melayu for survival in this country. English is only widely used by those who come from a socio-cultural background where English is used extensively, for example where parents are educated and speak English at home.

It was reported in a local daily that 17000 IT (Information Technology) graduates from the local universities were jobless due to their poor command of English (New Straits Times, Mon. Sept. 8<sup>th</sup> 2003). Human Resources Minister Datuk Fong Chan Onn contended that these graduates were unemployed because they did not meet the high standards set by their employers as companies preferred graduates who are proficient in English.

*“Local graduates are especially poor in English. That is the reason the ministry organises retraining programmes for them... .. But since most of the computer programmes and information in the Internet are in English, companies prefer employees who are good in the language.”*

(NST, 8<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2003, p. 4)

As English is once again gaining importance with the advancement of IT and reading is one of the most effective ways to learn and acquire a language, teachers should put more effort and emphasis in organising reading programmes and choosing suitable materials to kindle and sustain students interest in the language.

How one perceives the world around him or her would depend on how one develops his or her information skills and this can only be done by honing one's

reading skills. On the whole, students learning to read English as a foreign or second language find it a difficult process, and as a result, they do not enjoy it. Successful foreign language reading experiences can counter such feelings of dejection. Mason and Krashen (1997) found that extensive reading not only helped students to improve their language skills but also changed reluctant readers of English as Foreign Language (EFL) to become eager readers. Success in reading will make students enjoy language learning experience and realise the values of learning English.

There is also a need to develop reading programmes that can help students in Malaysia to understand the importance of reading to enhance language acquisition. A study carried out by Tsang (1996), provides us with further evidence of the effectiveness of extensive reading in fostering learners' language development. He found that "the reading programme was significantly more effective than the writing programme" (1996, p. 225) and the extensive reading programme proved to be very effective in promoting reading improvement and development from elementary level onwards.

A major problem for many language teachers is low student motivation in reading in the second language. This is especially so if their students have preconceived idea that they do not really need to read in English except for classroom purposes. Even though students in Malaysia are surrounded by ample reading materials, it has been my observation that majority of the students have no motivation to read books in English. Most teachers do not take any initiative to overcome this problem. They are only interested in finishing the syllabi in time and preparing the students for major government examinations. As such, no constructive effort has

been taken and implemented to encourage Malaysian students to read books widely in English to improve their language development and reading ability. Furthermore, Cooper (1986) found that learners at the University of Malaya were poorly motivated to spend further time on improving their English for they had a history of failure in English Language examinations. Therefore, “programmes that give them ample opportunity to succeed and thereby build their confidence and change their attitude to English from a negative to a positive one” (Cooper, p. 134) should be employed by teachers. In view of the above, this study is aimed at motivating students to read widely through available sources, that is, the Internet.

My interest in conducting this study is to find out the reading habits of Form Four students in a small town in Perak. Even though the students are surrounded by reading materials because the school is near to the town, the students have no motivation to read in English and even if they read, they prefer to read materials in Chinese language. The lack of interest among these students could be because they had their primary education in Chinese vernacular schools and their exposure to the English Language is limited as English was taught from Primary Three onwards only in vernacular schools then. The students are of average ability and some of them can talk in English though they are not fluent in it. They only use the language when forced by the teachers; otherwise they use Mandarin in their daily conversation in classroom and outside of it. Moreover, the students’ library records show that they do not visit or borrow books from the school library. Furthermore, there is no attempt made to involve these students in any programmes to enable them to excel in the target language. In this study, I came up with an extensive reading programme using

materials downloaded and graded from the Internet as an attempt to get the students involved in reading in English.

### ***1.5 Purpose of the Study***

Reading is an important skill needed to improve one's language and to acquire knowledge. The main purpose of this study is to observe the effectiveness of an extensive reading programme in motivating students to read. It is my hope that this programme would be an alternative approach for the learners to be independent and resourceful in their reading in the target language and develop their reading skills.

The purpose of this study is as listed below:

- a. To provide evidence of the effectiveness of extensive reading programme in fostering the learners' language development.
- b. To investigate if the extensive reading programme can help promote positive attitudes in students to enable them to be engaged in a focused and motivating reading programme.
- c. To lead learners along a path to be independent and resourceful in their reading and language learning.
- d. To develop the reading habit and to instil the habit of reading for pleasure among the students.

### ***1.6 Research Questions***

In an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the extensive reading programme, and to achieve the purpose of this study, I hope to answer the following questions:

1. Does the extensive reading programme motivate students of average English proficiency to read more in English?
2. Does the extensive reading programme encourage students of average English proficiency to read independently?

3. Does the extensive reading programme help students of average English proficiency to improve their English Language?

### ***1.7 Significance of the Study***

Research on the use of Second Language (L2) for reading has been done in many countries. As of today, there is no published research on the extensive reading programmes implemented in public schools in Malaysia. The significance of my study is to examine how graded extensive reading programme can motivate students to read materials in the target language as well as improve their proficiency level.

### ***1.8 Limitations of the Study***

The following limitations have been taken into consideration for this study:

This study looks at the use of an extensive reading programme in ESL context. This programme emphasizes the benefits of the extensive reading programme as input for learners' English Language learning and skills development. I could not carry out the research over a longer time period due to the students' busy schedule with examinations and various other extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, the graded reading materials were used to motivate the students to read. The materials are fables, which can also be found in the learners' mother tongue. Though fifteen fables were given to the students, they were only required to choose ten fables due to the time constraint. The sampling from only one school was chosen. The samples are school-going teenagers aged sixteen to seventeen. They are of average proficiency and the whole class participated in this programme. As only thirty-five students were involved in this research, the findings cannot be generalized for the whole population.

### **1.9 Definition of Terms**

Motivation is the key to all learning and is the backbone of any classroom. When the students are motivated the teacher can perform his or her job to the best of his or her ability. Psychologists define motivation as an internal process that activates, guides and maintains behaviour over time (Baron, 1992; Schunk, 1990). In other words, motivation is the influence of needs and desires on the intensity and direction of behaviour. In this research, however, I would like to adopt the definition of motivation by the Oxford Dictionary, which describes motivation as ‘an act of stimulating interest of a person in an activity’ (Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary, 2000). In this research, the activity referred to is reading. My aim is to motivate and increase the students’ interest in reading in the hope that their interest for reading will last a lifetime.

Habit is a settled or regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up. In other words, it is an addictive practice. In this study, I want my students to acquire the reading habit and sustain it throughout their life.

Extensive reading is generally associated with reading large amounts of materials with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. Beatrice Mikulecky (1990), calls it pleasure reading while Stephen Krashen (1993), terms it as free voluntary reading or when teachers give students time for reading in class - Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Extensive reading is a prime means of developing a taste for foreign language reading and all it requires is a library of suitable reading materials.

The definition of '*extensive reading*' that I have adopted for this project paper is reading a large quantity of materials for global or general understanding with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text.