

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The study of literature “begins in delight and ends in wisdom” (Hill, 1986, p. 7). One who studies literature would enjoy it, hence increasing ones knowledge. The study of literature would be a great aid to ESL students but it was omitted from second language programmes in the seventies (Hill, 1986). There were views that literature could only be appreciated by an elite few who had the literary competence. As Collie and Slater (1987) write, “Literature was thought as embodying a static, convoluted kind of language, far removed from the utterances of daily communication. Because of this it was sometimes tarred with an “elitist brush.” (p. 2).

However, now the pendulum has swung the other way and there is a renewed interest in literature teaching. According to Long and Carter (1991), “during the 1980’s the situation has changed quite radically and literature is undergoing an extensive reconsideration within the language teaching profession” (p. 1). In Malaysia there is also a considerable resurgence of interest in the study of literature to enhance the learning of English Language (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000).

The current KBSM English Language Curriculum reflects a literature-enriched curriculum. The shift from the Class Readers Programme, which was in 1976 to the Literature Component in the English Language Curriculum for Secondary Schools which was approved by the central Curriculum Committee in 1999, shows that literature is viewed as important in Malaysia.

This chapter will provide an overview of the role of literature in language learning and the importance of literature in the language classrooms. An

overview of the literature component in the Malaysian English Language Curriculum will be discussed. The rationale for the study, statement of the problem and the aims of the study will also be discussed. Then, the significance and limitations of the study will be examined.

1.1 The Role of Literature in Language Learning

Language is a subject of study as well as a medium for learning. Therefore, language learning is a complex process, yet young children generally master the language they are exposed to with considerable ease. Literature plays a vital role in a child's language learning process, in fact it contains the building blocks of the language, the word and the story (Cazden, 1972). Exposure to literary texts enables children to appreciate both the language and its literature.

The language children learn is the language they hear around them. The more effectively it is used around them, the more effectively they would be able to learn and acquire it. When learners listen to the teacher's instructions and explanations, when they express their views, answer questions and carry out tasks or activities in a literature-based class they are not only learning the language but also putting the language that they are learning into use. According to Carter and Walker (1989), "... literature is language in use and can therefore be exploited for language learning purposes." (p. 1).

If part of this language comes from stories, expressed by someone who uses it well, children learning the language will develop a concomitant love for literature (Cazden, 1972). Moreover, stories are a great aid to language learning. In

addition, stories can also be linked to Krashen's hypotheses on learning and acquisition of language (Krashen, 1982). For instance, much of the language used in stories includes many features that Krashen refers to as comprehensible input, simplified utterances which can be understood by non-native speakers (Zara and Salaberi, 1995). These utterances have a lot of repetition and clarification, deliberate rhythm and reference to things close by. Therefore, children will be able to enjoy literature (stories) and at the same time acquire and learn language, "Using literary texts in the language class can give benefits to the learners both in the fields of literature and language" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989, p. 69).

According to Harlin, Lipa and Lonberger (1991), literature is an important aspect to the child's language, cognitive and affective development and reading achievement. Therefore, literature should enable learners to develop a love for reading, an interest in books and life long reading and writing habits (Harlin, Lipa and Lonberger, 1991). Such habits will enhance language learning. Learners will become more aware of different literary styles of written language, for example genres such as prose, poetry and drama (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989). Therefore, literature plays an important role in a student's language learning process.

1.2 Literature in the Second Language Classroom

Various studies indicate that literature can enhance and reinforce learning of a language. This is because literary texts offer valuable authentic materials and enhances language development. It can also provide cultural enrichment and

foster personal involvement in readers. These elements will be discussed in the following sections.

Firstly, literary texts offer valuable authentic materials. According to Collie and Slater (1987), “. . . literature offers a beautiful and extremely varied body of written material which is ‘important’ in the sense that it says something about fundamental issues and which is enduring rather than ephemeral” (p. 3). Students need sufficiently a large amount of authentic materials, which they can understand to work from in order to learn a language. Krashen refers to this as ‘comprehensible input’ (Krashen, 1982). Chitavelu, Sithamparan and Teh (1995) point out, teachers should provide students with sufficient comprehensible input which can serve as models to internalise grammar, work out the meanings of words, understand the language heard and read and participate in talk. Literature on the other hand can provide this input.

Secondly, literature can enhance language development, “Language enrichment is one benefit often sought through literature” (Collier and Slater, 1987). As a model of language use, it shows us how vocabulary, grammar and patterns of discourse may be used effectively in various forms of writing to convey a message: appeal to the senses and evoke a response (Chitavelu, Sithamparan and Teh, 1985). For example, the figurative use of language can encourage students to develop the skill of comparison, for example, as big as a plum. Figurative language sharpens the students’ eye, and imagination stimulating him or her to view the world in a creative and imaginative way. As Carter and Long (1991) point out, literature can put students in touch with more subtle and varied creative use of the language.

Besides that, students can also learn the formal conventions of the written language,

Reading a substantial and contextualised body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language- the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas which broaden and enrich their own writing skills”(Collie and Slater, 1987, p.5).

Moreover, extensive reading of literary texts may develop the student’s ability to make inference from linguistic clues or to deduce meanings from context, both useful tools in reading. Literary texts can also serve as excellent prompts for oral work. For example, students can have a discussion on the main themes of the literary text. In other words, a student working with literature is helped with the basic skills of language learning. Literature can also serve as both a stimulus and context for language learning activities. As a stimulus students’ response to text can be exploited to produce language. As context, the student can, through tasks devised, be invited to “inhabit” text by assuming roles of characters in the texts (Chitravelu, Sithamparan and Teh, 1985).

Thirdly, literature also provides cultural enrichment. The “world” of a novel, play or short story is a created one. However, it still offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they believe in, fear, enjoy: how they speak and behave behind closed doors (Collie and Slater, 1987). As said by Carter and Long (1991),

Literature expresses the most significant ideas and sentiments of human beings and teaching literature represents a means by which students can be put in touch with a range of expression - often of universal value and validity over a historical period or periods.
(p. 2).

By providing learners with a multitude of vicarious experiences, literature enables learners to understand and appreciate cultures different from their own time and space. In addition, learners can come to perceive various traditions of thought, feeling and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows. Learners will then get an insight into different cultures.

Lastly, literature can aid the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters in readers. For example, when a short story is explored over a period of time, the reader begins to “inhabit” the text. The reader will be drawn into the book. The reader would be anxious to find out what happens as events unfold; the reader may feel close to certain characters and share their emotional responses, “... the fiction summons the whole person into its own world’ (Collie and Slater, 1987, p. 6). This is beneficial to the whole learning process, as engagement with the text will provide variety, fun and enjoyment, thus increasing the learners love for literature. As pointed out by Collie and Slater (1987), “ . . . literature, which speaks to the heart as much as to the mind, provides materials with some emotional colour, that can make fuller contact with ‘the’ learner’s own life . . . ” (p. 2).

1.3 The Literature Component in the Malaysian English Language Curriculum

Literature is viewed as vital in the English Language Classroom and it plays an important role in language learning. Therefore, it is important for ESL students in Malaysia to study literature. Due to its importance, the Central Curriculum Committee on the 20th July 1999 formulated the Literature Component (Ministry of

Education Malaysia, 2000). This component was implemented in Malaysian schools in March 2000 especially for form one and form four students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000).

The literature component aims to enhance students' proficiency in the English language through the study of a set of prescribed literary texts, while contributing to personal development and character building and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000). This then, brings us to the objectives of the literature component that 'draw upon the aims'. They are, to give personal response to texts, show an awareness of how language is used to achieve a particular response. In addition, to reflect upon and draw valuable moral lessons from the issues and concerns of life as portrayed in the literary works and relate them to one's life and to understand and appreciate other cultures.

Hence, it can be said that, the current literature component provides another avenue to further develop in students a deeper level of understanding, awareness and sensitivity to human values and issues. Literature, is concerned with humanity and its values, benefits and customs (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989). Therefore, it is an ideal subject for students to study because it will help them to become better human beings. In addition, it is also in line with the National Education Philosophy, which gives emphasis to the holistic development of the learner. Moreover, the study of literature in the language classrooms may further enhance one of the objectives of the KBSM English Language curriculum which is to read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment.

The Curriculum Planning Committee selected various literary texts to be included in this component (see Appendix 1). Literary texts were selected, bearing in mind the values they convey as well as the interest of the students. In this literature component genres offered for study are drawn from prose, i.e.: the novel and the short story, as well as the poetry (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000). The Literature component is supposed to be implemented in stages that is in March 2000 for form one and form four students, March 2001 for form two and form five students and March 2002 for form 3 students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000). Moreover, the new literature component will also be tested in the major English examinations: SPM (2001) and PMR (2002). 20% of the marks would be awarded for Literature in the English Language Paper. Besides that, the time allocated for the teaching of English from Form One until Form Five is five periods. Hence, one period from the five English periods is used for the teaching of literature in English (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000).

The teaching of the literature component is centred around the four basic skills of language: listening and speaking, reading and writing (see Appendix 2). If used sensitively, literary texts can develop and sharpen a learner's language skills. As said by Collie and Slater (1987), "Literature is a more significant part of a language teaching programme and of using it in such a way as to further the learner's mastery in the four basic areas listening, speaking, reading and writing" (p. 2). On the whole, it can be said that, the literature component complements the other more overt dimensions of the KBSM English Language Curriculum in fostering the development of language learning.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

The rationale for an exploration into the literature component in the Malaysian English Language Curriculum stem from the importance of literature as a vehicle for language learning among ESL students. It is undeniable that literature enhances the process of teaching and learning of English. In addition, by learning literature students would also be able to develop their reading skills so that they can read on their own and become readers for life. Students would also deal with various issues and themes from various texts. An exploration into these issues would enable students to be exposed to various cultures around them. Moreover, by studying literature students would perhaps acquire the ability to infer and interpret from texts. This ability would be beneficial to students even after secondary school as they enter into the world of tertiary education. Therefore, an exploration into the literature component is vital.

To further enhance the process of teaching and learning of literature, students need appropriate language learning strategies. Students need to use various language learning strategies in order to learn. Moreover, language learning strategies are important for language learners because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Students on the other hand need suitable social language learning strategies to develop communicative competence (Oxford, 1990). This then brings about the rationale as to why social language learning strategies will be explored in this study.

Moreover, social strategies such as asking questions, cooperating and empathising with others can be enhanced through talk or interaction. Talk is important

in learning literature because the literature experience with the text can be mediated by talk among students. Besides that group work can enhance the development of talk and it will be examined in this study. One cannot deny that the teaching and learning of literature, the use of social language learning strategies and group work are closely related to each other. Therefore, a study that attempts to explore the use of social language learning strategies in group work in a literature-based Form Four ESL class is extremely important.

1.5 Statement of Problem and Aims of the Study

This study attempts to explore the use of social language learning strategies in group work in a literature-based Form Four ESL class. Three dimensions of social language learning strategies will be explored in this study. They are, asking questions, cooperating with others and empathising with others.

This study, therefore aims to explore and compare the social language learning strategies used in group work between two groups of students with varying levels of proficiency in a literature-based Form Four ESL class. Thus the researcher set out to explore the following research questions in relation to a literature-based class:

- 1) What social language learning strategies do students use in group work?
- 2) What are students' perceptions of the use of social language learning strategies in group work?
- 3) What are the outcomes of using the social language learning strategies in group work?

The research questions will be explored in relation to the teaching and learning of short stories in a literature- based ESL Form Four class. In this study, “literature” refers to the use of literature as a resource for language teaching. In this study, the students are the main focus. This is because when students are actively involved in the learning process they would be able to learn better. Furthermore, success in the process of teaching and learning of literature depends on whether the students have learnt and understood the literary texts, tasks or activities. Oxford (1990), says it takes better teachers to focus on the students. Two groups of students with varying levels of proficiency will be compared and studied. One group who are fairly proficient and the other group who are of low proficiency.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study will give the researcher an in depth understanding of the social strategies students use during group work, their outcomes as well as the students’ perceptions of the use of social strategies in relation to the teaching and learning of short stories in a literature – based Form Four ESL class. An in depth understanding may perhaps help me to make changes in my practice and improve my style of teaching literature.

In addition, it will also give learners the opportunity to articulate their views, thoughts and feelings on this subject matter and to get some insights into their own language learning strategies, thus helping to improve their style or way of

learning literature. The use of these strategies in learning literature may perhaps encourage autonomous learning among students.

An insight into the social strategies students' use in group work may throw some light for English teachers seeking to use learner centred approaches and communicative language teaching methods for literature teaching. Moreover, teacher educators may also gain some insights on how to train young teachers to teach literature. Teachers and teacher educators could also consider the recommendations suggested in this research as possible means to enhance their own practice.

Most of the studies in Malaysia have focused on the various language learning strategies especially the meta cognitive strategies. Limited research has been done on the social language learning strategies. Therefore, this research would be able to add on to the body of knowledge in this field. It may also throw some light as to whether theoretical perceptions of social strategies in group work take "shape" in reality.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Firstly, this study was done only in one Form Four class in one secondary school, and it focused only on ten students. Due to the limited number of participants one cannot make a generalisation of the findings as applicable to the whole of the teaching learning situation in Malaysia. As such the data obtained may not represent conclusive evidence about the use of social language learning strategies in group work among all Malaysian students. The result of this study can only be regarded as tentative and may not be a true reflection of the social language learning

strategies used among fairly proficient and low proficiency students during group work in Malaysia.

Secondly, time was also a limitation in this study. This study was done over a short period of time (two months). Therefore, the focal informants did not have enough time to get used to the idea of being informants in this study. According to Seliger and Shohamy (1989), “. . . time needs to be allotted for the collection of data or for the exposure of the subjects to an experimental treatment.” (p p. 99-100). As a result, each time the focal informants were tape-recorded they tend to be very conscious and careful of their utterances. In addition, only one English period is allocated to the teaching of literature. As one period was insufficient to teach the short story, the researcher used double periods on an alternative week basis. This, however slowed down the pace of the study as students had “lost touch” with the idea of being informants.

Finally, the researcher also encountered difficulty in taking field notes because the researcher was also the teacher in the class. Therefore, it was rather difficult to observe and teach at the same time. At times while teaching the other groups in class, the researcher was unable to clearly observe what the focal informants were doing in their groups.

1.8 Conclusion

The study of literature is important. Social language learning strategies are vital in enhancing the teaching and learning of literature. Group work too plays an important role in the literature-based ESL class. Therefore, a study on the use of

social language learning strategies in group work in a literature-based ESL class is essential and this is the focus of this study.