

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

According to Kerry (1998), the Social Constructivist theories suggest that students learn through interaction and the social interaction of learning begins from the student in both teacher and student interaction or student and student interaction. The focus on the students needs to be seen in relation to the social nature of learning within the context of the classroom. The literature – based ESL classroom may be viewed as “a community of literary practitioners.” (Resnick,1990, p.171), where the literary experience with the text is mediated by talk among the teacher and the students as well as through classroom teaching and learning activities.

This is also in line with Vygotsky’s view, “. . . that learning itself is a dynamic social process through which the teacher in a dialogue with a student can focus on emerging skills and abilities” (Richard-Amato, 1988, p. 33). Through talk the learner or a more capable peer in the literature class would be able to “scaffold” the learning experiences of students so that they may gain a better understanding of the literary text. As said by Kerry (1998), the zone of proximal development theory states that students learn incrementally: beginning from what they know they “scaffold” knowledge to build a structure of understanding. Interaction in the literature classroom then may provide the rungs on these ladders of understanding.

Besides that, the talk that takes place in the literature class can further enhance the learning and acquisition of language. Wilga Rivers (1987, p p. 4 – 5) puts it this way,

Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint - problem solving task or dialogue journal. In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language – all they have learnt or casually absorbed – in real exchanges (in Brown, 1994, p. 159)

Students play an important role in the process of interaction and learning in the literature classroom. Students can be seen as, “. . . an active, self-determining individual who processes information in complex, often idiosyncratic ways that rarely can be predicted entirely in advance” (Wenden, 1985, p. 4).

Therefore, it is vital to discover what “active, self determining” learners do to help them learn better. This can be done by primarily examining the language learning strategies students use in group work to learn literature. In addition, the social constructivist theory also underpins collaborative classroom working, group based activities and discussion methods which can enhance interaction and learning (Kerry, 1998).

Therefore, this study focuses on the students and investigates the social language learning strategies they use during group work in a literature-based ESL class.

## **2.1 Language Learning Strategies**

Oxford (1990) describes learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). Wenden (1987) defines learning strategies as language behaviour learners engage in to learn and regulate their learning.

According to Mochizuki (1999), learning strategies have been broadly defined as any set of operators or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information.

Learners in general use various language learning strategies such as memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies to learn. However this study gives emphasis to the social language learning strategies in relation to the use of group work which complements the use of these strategies.

“Language is a form of social behaviour, it is communication, and communication occurs between and among people. Learning a language thus involves other people, and appropriate social strategies are very important in this process” (Oxford, 1990, p.144). Moreover, recent methodological advances encourages the learners to experience the literary text in an interactive manner (Francis, 1980).

This implies that the classroom literature experience can benefit from the social dimensions of talk and joint exploration by the students. Therefore, appropriate social strategies are vital to enhance the learning of literature and to develop students’ social competence.

This chapter will further define social language learning strategies, and discuss its nature. It will also define group work and discuss its importance within the context of a literature – based ESL class.

## **2.2 Social Language Learning Strategies**

This study focuses on the social language learning strategies. Therefore there is a need to define what is meant by these strategies. According to O' Malley and Chamot (1990), social language learning strategies means learning by interacting with others, such as working with fellow friends or asking the teacher's help (in Cook, 1997). According to Oxford (1990), social strategies includes asking questions, co-operating with others and empathising with others. All these strategies are known as "indirect strategies" because they support and manage language learning without (in many instances), directly involving the target language (Oxford, 1990).

Social strategies are subdivided into three main categories (see Figure 2.1). The first category is asking questions, which encompasses asking for clarification or verification and asking for correction. The second category is cooperating with others, which involves cooperating with peers and co-operating with proficient users of the new language. The third category is empathising with others, which entails developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

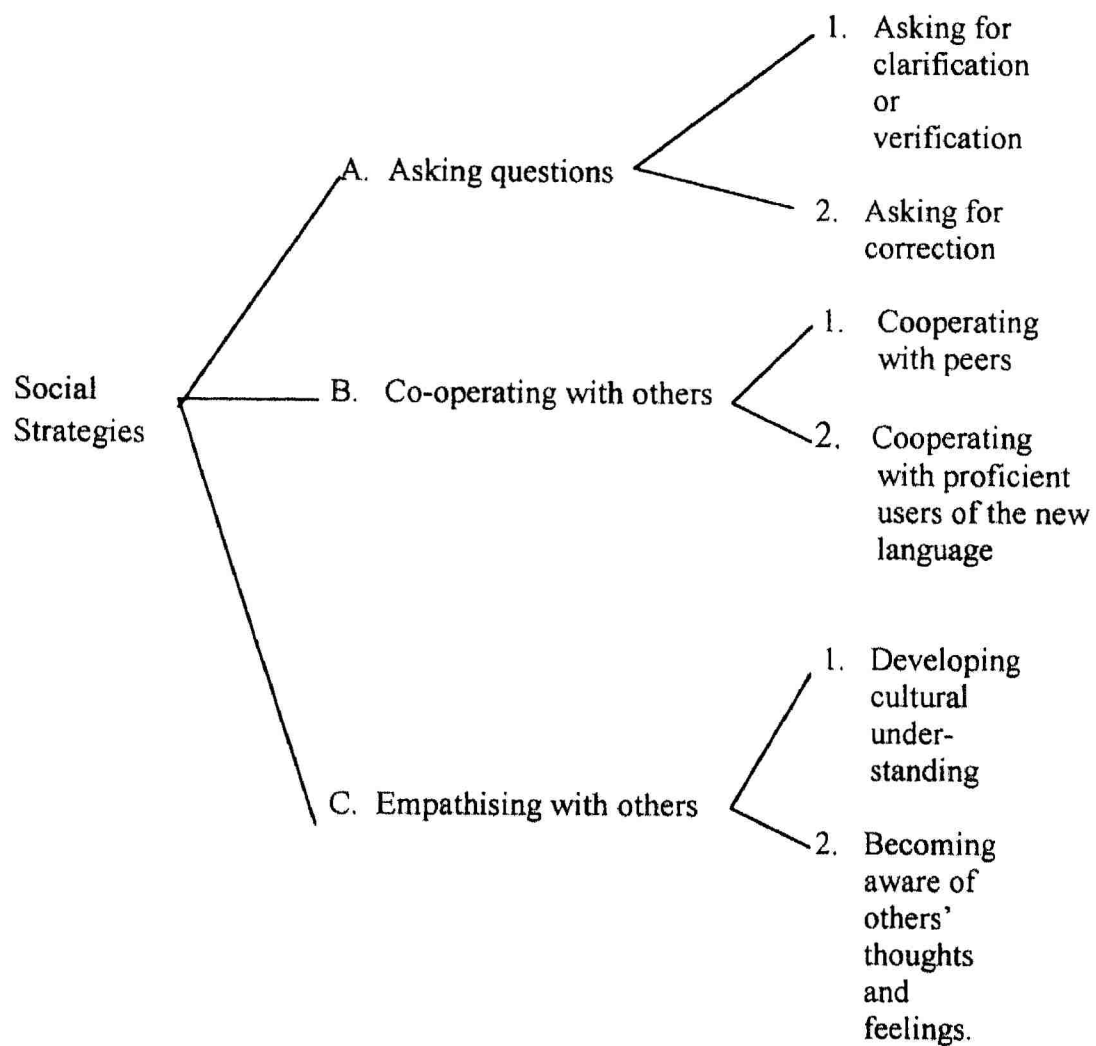


Figure 2      Diagram of the Social Strategies (Oxford, 1990).

### 2.2.1 Asking Questions

The social language learning strategy which entails asking questions, is one of the most basic modes of interaction. This social language learning strategy concerns asking questions for clarification (when something is not understood) or verification (when the learner wants to check whether something is correct) and the other involves asking for corrections (Oxford, 1990). Asking for clarification or verification includes, "Asking the speaker to repeat, paraphrase, explain, slow down, or give examples; asking if a specific utterance is correct or if a rule fits a particular case; paraphrasing or repeating to get feedback on whether something is correct" (Oxford, 1990, p p. 146 – 147). Whereas, asking for correction refers to, "Asking someone for correction in a conversation (Oxford, 1990, p. 147).

In the literature classroom asking questions is vital because students would be able to interact and communicate with each other by questioning, thus enhancing students understanding of the literary texts, tasks or and activities. As a result, the learner's intellectual and cognitive development can be enhanced. As Oxford (1990) argues,

Asking questions help learners get closer to the intended meaning and thus aids their understanding. It also helps learners encourage their conversation partners to provide larger quantities of "input" in the target language and indicates interest and involvement, the conversation partner's response to the learners question indicates whether the question itself was understood, thus providing indirect feedback about the learner's production skills (p. 145).

Questioning transfers the emphasis in learning from the teacher to the learner. Kerry (1998), further illustrates by stating that, "Asking questions puts the onus of learning where it belongs, on the student. Students have to put their ideas,

speculations, thoughts, feelings and hypothesis into words” (p. 18). In the process of questioning the student is required to think, speculate and contribute. This on the other hand, may perhaps increase the students’ motivation and confidence to learn literature because they are actively engaged in the process of learning literature. Hence, learning literature would be more effective and beneficial to the learner as children learn best when they are involved in the learning process.

Questioning in the literature classroom would also give the teacher feedback on the present state of knowledge of the students. Moreover, students would also have to meet the challenges of the literary materials, think aloud, open their minds to alternative solutions, make choices and use appropriate language to express their ideas (Kerry, 1998, p. 19). All the above is done through the process of questioning in the classroom, which can reinforce and extend the learning of literature.

Besides that, by asking questions in the literature classroom students’ interest and curiosity level can be stimulated. According to Kerry, (1998), “Learning through questioning has, as one of its attractions, the fact that students can be challenged and therefore, hopefully made interested in the learning” (p. 16). When students are interested in learning literature, the learning process becomes more meaningful, enjoyable and fun.

Asking for correction can encourage peer teaching and learning among students during group discussions. According to Brown (1994), “. . . group work can encourage spontaneous peer feedback on errors within the small group itself “. (p. 177). In addition, Ngoh (1991), argues that, students can self - correct errors and correct mistakes in spelling, grammar or pronunciation made by their peers at a level

comprehensible to the students themselves. Moreover, students can also correct and verify new ideas or concepts related to the literary texts. As a result, students will be teaching and learning from their peers, thus exhibiting a degree of self reliance that is simply not possible when the teacher is acting as a controller (Harmer, 1983).

Besides that, peer – teaching and learning may also help to reduce the level of anxiety among students as they are corrected and taught by their “friends” rather than the teacher. Students may also feel more secure when errors are corrected by their peers rather than errors being corrected by a figure of authority such as the teacher. The removal of the teacher’s authority may change the mode of learning from an evaluative mode to a sharing mode, thus creating a more permissive atmosphere in the literature classroom.

As a result, they may be able to learn literature, which is a new component in the current English Language Curriculum in a less “threatening” environment. Hence, the use of this strategy may increase the students’ confidence to express their thoughts, ideas and opinions in relation to literature and to use the language, as they interact with their peers in the target language.

### **2.2.2 Cooperating With Others**

Cooperating with others refers to cooperating with peers and with proficient users of the new language (Oxford, 1990). Cooperation is essential in the process of teaching and learning literature. This is because through cooperation among group members students would be able to clarify or verify ideas, opinions or



new concepts, hence increasing their understanding of the literary text. In addition, students would also be able to solve problems and perform other activities related to literary texts, thus producing a better piece of work According to Arnold (1999),

. . . cooperative learning requires social interaction and negotiation of meaning among heterogeneous group members engaged in tasks in which all group members have both something to contribute and to learn from the other members. In a well-structured cooperative task, there is a genuine information gap, requiring learners to both listen and contribute to the development of an oral, written or other product which represent the group's efforts, knowledge and perspectives (p. 227).

In addition, cooperation eliminates competition and encourages the presence of group spirit. According to Oxford (1990), “ . . . a cooperative task structure or a cooperative reward structure, either of which can encourage ‘positive interdependence’ and mutual support” (p p. 145 – 146). Cooperation provides mutual and peer support in the classroom, thus promoting positive collaborative interaction among students. Collaborative interaction with mutual support increases student motivation and confidence to learn literature because it eliminates stress and pressure. This is because students are working with their own peers to complete a task.

According to Collie and Slater (1987), cooperation among students to complete a literary task can be especially fruitful in helping the learner to find a way into what is usually an intensive personal and private experiences that is coming to terms with and inhibiting the author's universe. Collie and Slater (1987) further argue that,

In the creative endeavour of interpreting this new universe, a group with its various sets of life experiences can act as a rich marshalling device to enhance the individual's awareness both of his or her own responses and of the world created by the literary work (p. 9)

Slavin (1990) in Arnold (1999) says that by cooperating with others learners can build greater confidence and self esteem. Assinder (1991) also writes, peer support increases students' self confidence. A higher level of self confidence and self esteem may increase students' effort in learning literature and a greater willingness to take risks. In addition, Brown (1987) says, "learners have to be able to "gamble" a bit, to be willing to try out hunches about the language and take the risk of being wrong" (p. 105). Moreover, it will also enhance students thinking and creativity to further explore the literary text in a collaborative manner. As Collie and Slater (1987) point out, with group support and control, the learner has greater freedom to explore his or her own reactions and interpretation, thus stimulating learners to reread and ponder on the literary text on their own.

Besides that, peer support can be a powerful source of motivation for shy, insecure or even uninterested students. This is because when learners cooperate to complete a literature task, their peers can motivate them to continue to try, encourage and support their contributions (Arnold, 1999), hence motivating them to learn literature. Arnold (1999) also argues that,

Cooperative learning involves task or reward structure which better ensure that all members of the group will participate and do so at their own level of proficiency. Resource, goal and reward interdependence contribute to motivation, and enjoyable activities encourage participation as well (p. 235).

On the whole, cooperation provides opportunities to rehearse and receive feedback from their peers or proficient users of the language. This may perhaps reduce students' anxiety, to learn literature. This is particularly significant in the ESL context where learners view literature as a difficult subject to master. According to Collie and Slater (1987),

... working with a group can lessen the difficulties presented by the number of unknowns on a page of literary text. Very often someone else in a group will be able to supply the missing link or fill in an appropriate meaning of a crucial word, or if not, the task of doing so will become a shared one (p. 9).

### **2.2.3 Empathising With Others**

According to Oxford (1990), “Empathy is the ability to ‘put yourself in someone else’s shoes’ in order to better understand that person’s perspective” (p. 140). Empathy can be developed easily when language learners use these strategies. Empathy with others involves developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others’ thoughts and feelings. Developing cultural understanding refers to, “Trying to empathise with another person through learning about the culture, and trying to understand the other person’s relation to that culture” (Oxford, 1990, p. 147). Becoming aware of others’ thoughts and feelings refers to “Observing the behaviours of others as a possible expression of their thoughts and feelings; and when appropriate, asking about thoughts and feelings of others” (Oxford, 1990, p. 147).

Empathy in general is essential to successful communication. This is because learners can become more aware of fluctuations in the thoughts and feelings of particular people during interaction. According to Oxford (1990), such an awareness brings learners closer to the people they encounter, help them understand more clearly what is being communicated, and suggests what to say and do. As a result, communication or interaction becomes more fruitful, and meaningful. Students would also become more sensitive to other peoples needs. It will also help to strengthen students’ rapport with each other.

Besides that, empathy in the literature classroom can also aid students understanding of the cultural aspects of the text. This is because learners may be able to put themselves in the characters' shoes or world in order to understand the text better and the cultural perspective. Knowledge of the new culture can also help the learners to understand better what is heard or read in the new language.

For example, knowledge of various social conventions and customs, attitude, values, social class distinctions, religious or political ideas, diet and dress and historical background may enhance their understanding of the literary text. According to Hill (1986), students would be able to grasp the text better if they have some background knowledge on the cultural aspects of the text. Oxford (1990) also points out, such knowledge also helps learners to know what is culturally appropriate to say aloud or in writing and sharpen their cultural understanding of the literary text and of themselves.

### **2.3 Group Work in the Literature-Based ESL Class**

Group work is an important element in this study because it aims to investigate the social language learning strategies students' use in group work. What is group work? "It is a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self initiated language" (Brown, 1994, p. 173). Group work usually implies "small" group work, that is, students in groups of perhaps six or fewer (Peacock, 1998).

Group work is vital in a literature-based class because recent methodological advances encourage students to experience literary text in interactive

terms. For example as McRae (1987) writes, “. . . teaching literature has moved towards interaction, reader’s response and activity work on the texts” (p. 9). Thus, group work provides great opportunity for this enhancement.

According to Francis (1988), group work is important in a literature-based classroom because individual student’s workload can be reduced since work is divided. Students would then deal with “smaller portions” of work, hence making the process of learning literature easier and more relaxing. To add, the foreign language will be practised a good deal more and this in turn will lead to an improvement in students’ performance in both the written and spoken form of the language. According to Ur (1981), “They may correct each other’s mistakes, help out with a needed word, and of course they will teach each other some none – linguistic materials as well, through the content of the discussion” (p. 8).

Besides that, students will also come to a better understanding of the literature if they work together to analyse it. Further Francis (1988) states, “. . . if students analyse literary texts in groups, they will normally understand them better than they could be working alone” (p. 30). This is because they would be able to discuss and clarify what they do not understand.

Moreover, group work generates interactive language, promotes learner responsibility and autonomy and offers an embracing affective climate to enhance the teaching and learning of literature. These elements will be further discussed in the following sections.

### **2.3.1 Interactive Language**

According to Brown (1994), “Small groups provide opportunities for student initiation, for face to face give and take, for practice in negotiation of meaning, for extended conversational exchanges and for student adoption of roles” (p. 173). In addition, group interaction assists learners in negotiating for more comprehensible input and in modifying their output to make it more comprehensible for others (Krashen, 1982). This would promote a better understanding of the literary text tasks or activities among students in a literature based ESL class.

For example, students would be able to exchange views, ideas and notions about various themes or characters in the literary texts. If students are given the opportunity for such an exchange perhaps students’ critical thinking can be enhanced. Moreover, in such an exchange students are able to gain various perspectives into a given topic for discussion, thus increasing their knowledge and understanding. Group work also allows the learning of literature to take place both consciously and unconsciously.

According to Johnson (1995), when students engage in the exchange and interpretations of ideas it can generate cognitive conflict, which can challenge students to reorganise or rethink their prior understanding. This is in line with the cognitive code language learning theory that proposes to teach learners to think for themselves and to organise their knowledge (Brown, 1994).

Peacock (1988) points out, group work is an attractive idea to increase the amount of student talking time where students have the opportunity to communicate with each other. Students would then have more opportunity to discuss

elements related to literature such as the themes, characters, plot and literary devices. Such opportunity may increase students' understanding of the literary text. In addition, Howe (1988) states that, students are more likely to begin to develop their oral abilities and confidence if they are encouraged to use the spoken word to reshape understanding for themselves, present ideas and experiences to others through "talk".

### **2.3.2 Learner Responsibility and Autonomy**

Group work promotes learner autonomy. In group work the whole discussion focuses on the learners' ability to make choices and decisions thus reducing the learners' dependence on the teacher hence promoting independent learning. Independent learning is an element of learner autonomy where learners take responsibility for their own learning (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989). This may ease the teacher's tension and burden of teaching literature because students would also be actively involved in the process of teaching and learning literature. The whole responsibility to teach the subject then does not fall on the teacher solely. It becomes a "shared" responsibility between the students and the teacher, thus resulting in effective learning of literature.

Stevick (1976, p p. 33 – 34, quoted in Allwright, 1984) says that, "... we may expect learning to be more effective the more deeply it involves the learner" (p. 157). This is simply because children learn best when they are involved in the teaching learning process. In addition, through active involvement learners become more independent learners and they will be able to learn through self-discovery because students would have the opportunity to 'experiment' with their ideas,

thoughts and opinions in relation to literature and language in group work. Perhaps through self discovery students may discover more “hidden” themes in a literary text. Self discovery learning on the other hand would also reduce the dependence on the “spoon-fed system”. Students would not totally depend on the teacher for input on literature. They may independently “search” for more input. This will also be in line with the learner - centred approach, which is emphasised in the present KBSM curriculum.

### **2.3.3 Affective Climate**

Group work may provide a more conducive environment for learning literature. Students may be more vocal in small groups as there is a smaller audience observing and listening to them. They may also not be afraid of making mistakes because a teacher may not be constantly there to evaluate and correct them. The removal of the teacher’s authority may change the mode of interaction from an evaluative mode to a sharing mode, thus creating a permissive atmosphere.

As a result, students may feel more comfortable and relaxed in a less “threatening” environment to learn literature. In such an atmosphere students will have a more “receptive” attitude to learn literature. Learners who have a “receptive” rather than a “defensive” attitude to learning will be more likely to benefit from their lessons (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1989).

According to Tsui (1995), once the evaluation mode is removed, students would take the risk to verbalise their ideas even when they are not sure whether it is right or wrong and they may not be shy to verbalise their thoughts,



opinions and ideas. Further, the removal from the evaluative mode may be an effective way to alleviate anxiety in learning literature and increase students' motivation to learn literature. According to Brown (1994), "With Maslow's "security/safety" level satisfied through the cohesiveness of the small group, learners are thus freed to pursue higher objectiveness in their quest for success" (p. 174).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter gives an overview on the various social language learning strategies learners' use and the importance of group work in a literature based ESL class. More importantly it provides the conceptual framework for the present study. There is a close connection between the use of social language learning strategies and group work because group work can enhance the use of the various social strategies. This chapter has provided a discussion of the theoretical aspects of social language strategies in group work. A fundamental question remains: Do learners actually use these strategies in reality? And if so, how are they played out? This study may shed some light as to whether these theoretical elements take shape in "reality" and more importantly it will provide insights as to whether these processes facilitate the effective learning of literature by ESL students.