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VOCABULARY SIZE AND USAGE: ENRICHING LEXICON VIA READER RESPONSE

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FBMK 1999 9

VOCABULARY SIZE AND USAGE: ENRICHING LEXICON VIA READER RESPONSE

By

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Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of
Modern Languages & Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia

February 1999

UPM

To Ambikapathi

my collaborator
my inspiration
my guide
my joy
my husband

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to everyone who helped complete this project paper from the proposal stage to the finished product. Though my name adorns the front cover, credit for the paper belongs to many individuals who in one way or another, have contributed to the final product. I am highly grateful to my Supervisor Dr. Sali Zaliha Mustapha for her continuous support, feedback and ideas throughout the process. A particularly warm thank you is due to my mentor Dr. Margaret Maney whose penetrating observations, sympathethic suggestions and observant editings smoothed out many imperfections. Appreciation is also extended to Dr. Shameen Rafeek Galea for her many helpful suggestions and guidance on the entire paper. I am particularly grateful to Professor I.S. P. Nation of the University of Wellington, for permission to use the Vocabprofile programme and for allowing me to modify the wordlists according to the needs of my study.

No set of acknowledgements would be complete without recognition of the Principals of the selected schools who kindly allowed me to use their schools, the heads of the English Departments and the 80 students who participated in the study. Therefore, my sincere thanks. Thanks is also due to Miss Rani Mariappan who helped to proof-read and edit my final drafts. This paper would never have seen the light of day without the support, encouragement and gentle prodding of my husband, Ambikapathi as the writing proceeded. For that, and much more, the book is dedicated to him.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii
LIST OF TABLES vii
LIST OF FIGURES viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ix
ABSTRACT x
ABSTRAK xi

CHAPTER

I **INTRODUCTION** 1
Background of the Study 1
Statement of the Problem 6
Objectives 13
Significance of the Study 14
Assumptions of the Study 16
Limitations of the Study 16
Definition of Terms 17
Organisation of the Study 20

II **REVIEW OF LITERATURE** 21
Review of the Research Tradition 21
To Know a Word 22
The Vocabulary of Native Versus Non-Native Speakers 23
Vocabulary Instruction 24
The Vocabulary Acquisition Process 24
Encountering the Unfamiliar Word 27
Vocabulary Learning Strategies 27
Depths of Processing Theory 28
Factors Affecting Vocabulary Learning 30
Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge 30
The Teacher's Role in Increasing Vocabulary Knowledge 30
Active and Passive Vocabulary 31
The Learner's Burden 32
Direct Measures of Academic Vocabulary 33
Measuring Lexical Richness 34
The Lexical Frequency Profile 34
The Wordlists 35
Teaching Vocabulary within the Context of Literature 36
Contemporary Literary Theory and Practice to the Rescue 40
Reader- Response Criticism as an Interpretive Tool 42
Myths as a Context for Vocabulary Enrichment in the ESL Classroom 44
Archetypes in the Context of Myth Theory and Practical Criticism 46

Myths as Enduring ("Classic") Literature 47
The Work of the Mythological/Archetypal Critic 48
Modern Myths and Archetypes 48
Reader-Response Theory, Myth and Archetypal Criticisms in the ESL Classroom 49
Summary 50

III **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD** 51
Introduction 51
Conceptual Framework of the Study 52
Type of Study 53
Participants 53
Method and Design 55
Sampling Design - Seeking Approval 57
Wordlists - Designing the Checklist 57
Preliminary Test 59
Implementation of Study 60
Population and Selection of Sample 62
Survey Instrument 66
Questionnaire 67
Pre-test 67
Post-test 69
Interim Activities 71
Analysis of Data 73
Limitation of the Methodology 76
Definition of Terms 76
Summary of Study 76

IV **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION** 79
Description of the Population 79
Types of Groups 80
Age, Gender and Race 80
Language Use 81
Frequency of Access 82
Word Size and Word Use 83
Reading Preference 85
LFP in Relation to Proficiency and Background 88
Different Language Proficiency Levels 88
ESL Environment and Science Background 92
LFP and Science Background 95
LFP and the Language Factor 99
Lexical Frequency Profile and the Changes Over Time 101
Lexical Variation and Vocabulary Instruction 104
Lexical Variation 104
Vocabulary Strategies versus Lexical Variation 108
Strategy 1-Repeated Words to Enrich Meaning 109
Strategy 2- Explaining to Organise Text 109
Strategy 3- Using Words to Describe a Character 110
Strategy 4- Well Used Words 111
Mental Processing Strategies 112
Changes in Lexical Variation 116
Reader Response and Cognitive Maturity 121
Summary 124

V SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 125
Summary of the Study 125
Major Findings and Discussions of the Study 127
Language Use 127
Reading Preference 128
Lexical Frequency Profile in Relation to
Proficiency and Background 130
Different Proficiency Levels 130
ESL Environment and Science Background 132
Science Background 133
Changes in Lexical Profile with Time 134
Changes in Lexical Variation with Vocabulary Instruction 135
Limitations of the Study 138
Pedagogical Implications 139
Recommendations and Suggestions 140
Syllabi Development 140
Teacher Training 141
Literature - Based Texts 142
Recommendations for Further Research 143
Conclusion 144

REFERENCES 145

APPENDIX

A A University Word List 156
B The Early Birdmen/
The Legend of Daedalus and Icarus 157
C Permission Letter - EPRD 158
D Permission Letter - JPN 159
E Permission Letter- PPD- Batu Pahat 160
F The Active Version of the Vocabulary Level Test/
In-house Placement Test 161
G Permission Letter - I.S.P. Nation 162
H Vocabulary Size and Usage-Week 1 163
I Vocabulary Size and Usage- Week 2 164
J Vocabulary Size and Usage- Week 3 165
K Vocabulary Size and Usage - Week4 166
L Vocabulary Size and Usage- Week 4 167
M (I-V) Elegy - Daedalus and Icarus 168
N Vocabulary Size and Usage - Questionnaire 171
O Vocabulary Size and Usage
The Legend of Daedalus and Icarus 172
P "Untitled" with Plate 173
Q Vocabulary Size and Usage -
Musλe des Beaux Arts - W.H.Auden 174
R Landscape with the Fall of Icarus -.W.C.Williams 175
S-I Analysis of Individual Word Types 176
S-II Analysis of Individual Word Types 177
T-I Written Passages of the Pre-Test and
Post-Test of the 5th Student -Control Group 1 178
T-II Post- Test : HEP Control Group 1 179
U-I Pre-Test: LEP Control Group 2 180

PERPUSTAKAAN
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

U-II Post-Test: LEP Control Group 2 181
V-I Pre-Test: HEP Experimental Group 3 182
V-II Post-Test: HEP Experimental Group 3 183
V-III Post-Test: HEP Experimental Group 3 184
W-I Pre-Test: LEP Experimental Group 4 185
W-II Post-Test: LEP Experimental Group 4 186

VITA 187

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Vocabulary Size of Native Speakers	23
Table 3.1	Research Questions and Design	56
Table 3.2	The Groups and their Variables	65
Table 4.1	Respondents by Age, Gender, Race and School	81
Table 4.2	Linguistic Background of Respondents	86
Table 4.3	Reading Preference	87
Table 4.4	Mean Percentage and Standard Deviation of Word Types at Different Frequency Levels	89
Table 4.5	Words Used by Each Student as during Pre-test and Post-test According to Word Level	94
Table 4.6	Words Used by First Five Students within Each Group that are Specific to their Fields	96
Table 4.7	Relationship between Language Factors and LFP	100
Table 4.8	Relationship between Books Read and Lexical Profile	100
Table 4.9	Relationship between Types of Books and Lexical Profile	101
Table 4.10	Comparison of Lexical Frequency Profile in the Pre-test and Post-test	102
Table 4.11	Lexical Frequency Profiles of the Pre-Test and Post-test (without the 1st. 1000 words)	103
Table 4.12	Changes in Lexical Variation over the Pre-test and Post-test	106
Table 4.13	Correlation Between Changes - Lexical Profiles and Changes in Lexical Variation after the Post-test.	107

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Lexical Comprehension/Production Model for Oral and Written Modalities	26
Figure 2	The Wordlists available within the Lexical Frequency Profile	36
Figure 3	The Study Groups	54
Figure 4	Instruments Employed in the Study	70
Figure 5	Model for Vocabulary Acquisition	72
Figure 6	Outline of Analysis of Data	75
Figure 7	The Stages within the Study	78
Figure 8	Vocabulary Strategies	108
Figure 9	HEP Group- Adjectives to Describe a Character	110
Figure 10	Lexical Variation- Well Used Words	112
Figure 11	Difference Before and After Vocabulary Instruction -High English Proficiency (Control) Group 1	117
Figure 12	Difference Before and After Vocabulary Instruction -High English Proficiency Experimental Group 3	118
Figure 13	Difference Before and After Vocabulary Instruction -Low English Proficiency (Control) Group 2	119
Figure 14	Difference Before and After Vocabulary Instruction -Low English Proficiency Group 4	120
Figure 15	Reader-Response: Deconstructive Criticism at Work	121
Figure 16	Response in Praise of the Anti Hero	122
Figure 17	Reader Response: Cognitive Maturity	123

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBP	Convent Batu Pahat
DPT	Depth of Processing Theory
EPRD	Educational Programme and Research Development
ESL	English as a Second Language
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GSL	General Service List
HEP	High English Proficiency
Kem. Pen.	Kementerian Pendidikan (Education Ministry)
KPPK	Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum (Curriculum Development Centre)
L1	First Language/mother tongue
L2	Second Language
LD	Lexical Density
LEP	Low English Proficiency
LFP	Lexical Frequency Profile
LO	Lexical Originality
LS	Lexical Sophistication
MVP	Modified Vocabprofile
NIL	Not in List Basewords
SMS	Sekolah Menengah Munshi Sulaiman
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education.)
STI	Sekolah Menengah Tun Ismail
TESL	Teaching of English as a Second Language
TIGS	Temenggong Ibrahim Girls School
UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia
UWL	University Word List
VKS	Vocabulary Knowledge Scale
VP	Vocabprofile

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in Fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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February 1999

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Faculty: **Modern Languages and Communication**

Effective use of appropriate vocabulary has always been associated with mastery of a language but little attention is given to vocabulary building in the ESL classroom. A six week study based on a combined experiment on reading and interactive vocabulary instruction conducted amongst eighty advanced Malaysian fifth formers from four schools, tested the hypothesis that L2 students exposed to a combination of regular periods of reading and interactive vocabulary instruction of stylistics and canonical literary text would show significant increase in their ability to respond to literary text. The students' lexical richness and lexical frequency profile was measured via a computer software known as Vocabprofile.

The results of the study showed that it was possible to obtain a reliable measure of lexical richness, which was stable across a cross section of L2 students. It was established that ESL speakers could increase their lexical richness with additional assistance from other sources within a specified period. However, their lexical variation does not increase at a similar pace or match the level of native speakers' writings.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia Sebagai mememnuhi keperluan Ijazah Master Sastera.

SAIZ KOSA KATA DAN PENGGUNAAN: PENGKAYAAN KOSA KATA MELALUI RESPON PEMBACA

Oleh

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Februari 1999

Pengerusi: **Profesor Madya Sali Zaliha Mustapha, Ph. D.**

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Penggunaan perbendaharaan kata secara berkesan seringkali dikaitkan dengan kemahiran dalam suatu bahasa tetapi kurang perhatian yang diberikan terhadap pembinaan kosa kata dalam bilikdarjah Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Satu kajian selama 6 minggu berasaskan kombinasi pengajaran berbentuk bacaan dan interaksi dijalankan di kalangan 80 pelajar tingkatan 5 dari 4 buah sekolah untuk menguji hipotesis bahawa pelajar yang terdedah kepada kombinasi sesi bacaan dan sesi interaksi akan menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam kebolehan menghayati teks kesusasteraaan. Kekayaan leksis pelajar dan profil kekerapan leksikal diukur melalui perisian komputer bernama Vocabprofile.

Dapatan kajian mengesyorkan kewujudan satu sukatan kekayaan leksikal yang boleh dipercayai serta stabil di kalangan keratan rentas pelajar bahasa kedua. Sementara penutur ESL berjaya meningkatkan kekayaan leksikal dalam masa yang ditetapkan, namun variasi tidak meningkat pada kadar yang sama atau dapat menyaingi tahap penulisan penutur asli bahasa Inggeris.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of the major determinants of the vocabulary used in the written productions of English as Second Language (ESL) learners is the vocabulary size of the writer. Effective and appropriate use of vocabulary have a positive effect on the reader and on the writing as a whole. Vocabulary size is important especially for the writer who is a second language (L2) learner with a relatively small vocabulary compared to a native speaker (L1) but who has to work with reading and writing assignments that require a wide vocabulary. In many instances, measures of lexical richness have been able to help interested parties to identify the degree to which a writer is using a varied and large vocabulary. This knowledge should, in turn, facilitate the development of strategies and reading materials that would help enrich the existing vocabulary of ESL learners.

Background of the Study

ESL learners at the higher secondary and tertiary levels or the advanced stage, often encounter a formidable task when it comes to vocabulary size and its use. This phenomenon could be because ESL learners who have been satisfied with the 2,000 to 3,000 word level vocabularies (which are required for memorising declarative knowledge) suddenly find themselves requiring a mastery of vocabulary levels that exceed 5,000 words when they have to apply higher level thinking skills at the tertiary level. The term "higher level thinking" as defined by Bloom (1956) refers to those mental processes involving application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of materials (Pikkert & Foster,

1996, p. 58). In this respect, even highly knowledgeable students have difficulty in expressing their findings and opinions due to their relatively small vocabulary.

While it may be generally accepted that producing students who are academically superior is an important objective of the educational system, it must also be understood that teaching students to think requires more than mere possession of knowledge. Instruction at the advanced level should apply to effective application of the newfound knowledge to problem situations within the academic discipline. However, to put the knowledge across -especially in the written mode- is highly dependent on the linguistic ability of each student. Students need to be aware that a well-written composition need not be reflected in a large vocabulary, but in a rich vocabulary. Thus, it would be necessary for students to be able to weigh between the breadth of vocabulary size and balance it with the depth of their vocabulary use. In fact, it is not important to have only a wide command of the language, since lexical density (*percentage of lexical words in a composition*) does not necessarily measure lexis proper (Laufer, 1994, p. 322). There is a greater need for students undergoing academic courses to aim for appropriate and accurate language that states the meanings and intentions immediately. Unfortunately, teachers in attempting to guide students towards acquiring the necessary vocabulary, tend to spend too much time making students learn up new vocabulary through context and lengthy wordlists. Traditional forms of learning such as memorising lists of words do not help since the onus is not on vocabulary but on the effective application of the available vocabulary. Furthermore, it is found that at the tertiary level, students find such wordlists difficult to learn due to the lack of context as the words are presented in isolation (Meara, 1996, p. 33). This is further aggravated by the lack of opportunity to use most of the learned words in the immediate surrounding. Eventually, these words become part of the learners' passive vocabulary or unmotivated vocabulary.

Vocabulary learning activities and strategies that demand vocabulary in students' long term memory to be manipulated in some manner were found to be a better choice. The teacher in turn acts as a facilitator who enables students to use all avenues to expand their existing word field. The advantage would be that as students enter senior level courses, they become ideal material for studying literature in English and for producing effective writing. In fact the integration of language and literary studies is now an acceptable proposition to most curriculum developers and language teachers (Maley, 1989, p. 59). In a senior level course in which the reading content is literature, students get to be creative, logical as well as critical in their thinking. Most of all, they get to use words and as they put forth their ideas, they get to see the importance of using appropriate and accurate words in their interpretations. Indirectly, repeated use and exposure to certain words in the various literary texts would help to reactivate their existing but passive vocabulary. Furthermore, literature with its ambiguous nature where each interpretation has its validity makes it suitable for all students, provided they have a satisfactory working level of language proficiency. As students at senior level courses do have a ready working vocabulary, classroom discussions and exercises dealing with the elements of literature such as imagery, style and word choice would be most useful in leading to an understanding and appreciation of the importance of lexical size and lexical use. However, efforts must also be made to investigate whether some partial knowledge might be reactivated to increase their existing vocabulary size.

Though factors other than fluency of the language affect the creativity of an individual in a written production, a rich command of vocabulary is most likely to have a positive effect on the reader. In fact, studies by Dole, Christopher & Woodrow (1995) have shown that students with extensive vocabularies do better in reading and writing tests than students with smaller vocabularies (p. 453). This makes sense since students who know more words are bound to understand what they read and therefore should be able to

write better. The ability to use a language well, being aware of its nuances as well as having the near native 'feel' for the language would augur well for any individual. This is because lexical density is dependent on the syntactic as well as cohesive properties of the composition. As such, when learners are in a situation where there are demands upon them to make use of what they know, there should be a relationship between direct measures of vocabulary size and the richness of the vocabulary in the thinking process.

As Malaysia prepares a generation of English-speaking students whose "role will be to interface with the influx of English-based information before it could be applied to Bahasa Melayu and the society in general," these students need to master a wider and richer vocabulary before they themselves can address world issues (Pikkert & Foster, 1997, p. 56). An individual highly fluent in the language can produce a great many ideas and concepts relevant to a problem within a short period of time as well as understand a situation easily. He should be able to shift from the direction of thinking which he had been used to and be able to adopt new approaches.

The process of acquiring a second language, namely English, has often been discussed in terms of the learner's progress from a non-existent knowledge of L2 towards near native competence. Thus, if language acquisition were to be discussed in terms of this interlanguage continuum[1], then lexical acquisition would have to account for the gradual increase in the learner's vocabulary size. Investigations in the acquisition of vocabulary among native English speakers by linguists such as Nagy and Herman in 1987 and Nation in 1990, have revealed that by the last year of high school, the typical student has learned 40,000 words, which is an average of 3,000 words per year. Zimmerman (1997) summarised a number of studies investigating the acquisition of vocabulary among advanced learners and estimated that a learner had mastered about 20,000 to 25,000 words

[1] Moving from a non-existent knowledge of L2 towards native like competence.

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upon college entrance (p. 121). By way of comparison, Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1997) reported that the average middle class child in the United States read about 1 million words per year in English, both inside and outside of school (cited in Johnson & Virginia, 1996, p. 348). This would mean that approximately 80,000 to 100,000 words are becoming part of his latent vocabulary per month, depending on how much reading is done during vacations (Kyung & Krashen, 1994, p. 665). Thus a logical extrapolation would be that an ESL upper secondary student would have to learn, on an average, more words than this if he intends to be equally proficient in the language as the native speaker. Therefore, the leading questions would be: How do ESL students enrich or expand their vocabulary effectively, and is it possible to measure their lexical variation?[2]

Though there is no such thing as uniformity in language, there are some similarities in the vocabularies of some languages which have a common root such as those from the Indo-European language families (Meara, 1996, p. 33). It could also be argued that cognate vocabularies appear relatively easy to learn. Meara also states that a Dutchman, for example, might find basic English vocabulary relatively easy since many of the English headwords cognate with items in Dutch. Though he might face problems with the less frequently used vocabulary, by the time he reaches these low frequency words, he would probably have reached a high level of independence and autonomy and thus become fluent in the language. On the other hand, Meara (1996) added that the Arab or Vietnamese would permanently find the process of acquiring new words never getting any easier merely because their L1 lexicon are shaped and structured differently from the English vocabulary (1996, p. 33). However, as stated by Laufer (1994), "longitudinal studies of the development of the productive lexicon on L2 learners are almost non-existent" (p. 21). Meara also claims that "we still do not seem to have made any real advances in the measurement of [L2] vocabulary acquisition" (1996, p. 38). In fact, Meara

[2] Ratio in % between the different words and total number of running words in a written production.

views current research as being restricted to looking at vocabulary as discrete items which can be marked correct or otherwise on the basis of simple recognition. Therefore, "vocabulary expansion should accord well with learners' personal experiences and be capable of allowing fellow researchers to develop a sensitive model of what learning words in an L2 situation really involves" (p. 2). Furthermore, he also felt that the question of how much individual variation there is in vocabulary skills was the issue that had to be made a top priority in L2 vocabulary acquisition research (p. 36).

Statement of the Problem

One of the prime determinants of quality written production is vocabulary size. In fact, it is the lexical richness that quantifies the degree to which a writer is to use his varied and extensive vocabulary. Lexical richness is important because it can be used to distinguish some of the factors that affect the quality of writing and it can be used to examine the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary use.

There appear to be no obvious way of describing complexity in the lexicon, or how a small lexicon differs from a large one (apart from its size). Evidently this is clearly a problem researchers will have to address if there is to be an understanding of what is really going on in a developing lexicon. As such, Meara advocates that "more work on advanced learners need to be carried out to assess how the overall structure of L2 lexicon develops and how the size of a learner's lexicon affects the way new words are acquired" (p. 3).

ESL teachers would acknowledge that little vocabulary building gets done through direct teaching. Language teaching at the higher level does not necessarily cover a wide range of words. The teachers discuss neither collocations (arrangement of words) nor semantic relationships to enable students to gain any in-depth understanding of new

vocabulary. Students are generally told to highlight the difficult words in a passage and the meanings discussed only if time permits. There is no follow up and the new words are easily forgotten after the lesson. The general tendency then is to assume that when students are taught grammar, reading, and writing, they build their vocabulary on their own as they engage in other activities. The learning lists, which comprise a number of words that learners are required to memorise and recall when necessary, are unsatisfactory because what may be effective for small numbers of words is much less obviously effective as ways of learning large vocabularies.

In Malaysia reading is often perceived as important but not necessarily fun (Fatimah and Lynne, 1992). As a consequence, there is a general lack of reading interest among Malaysian students. In fact, an increasing number of students are unable to understand and react to academic texts since they have a poor command of the language and little acquaintance with difficult words. Teachers, in their over-zealousness to promote linguistic proficiency, tend to focus only on the acquisition of the four language skills -- specifically listening, speaking, reading and writing, propagated by current ESL methodologies since L2 vocabulary learning at an advanced level is often seen as incidental (Laufer, 1994, p. 41). With the focus being "on broadening students' language . . . appropriate to their maturity level," most teachers prefer to use texts according to their students' proficiency level. This brings about a wide difference in the number of words that students are exposed to according to background and frequency of access. However, by the end of the fifth form, all students have to sit for the 1322/1119 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English paper which is the near equivalent of the General Certificate Examination (GCE). Section two of the SPM paper requires learners to produce effective, critical written production with accurate, precise and varied vocabulary to achieve a particular effect (Lembaga Peperiksaan[3], 1997). Many practising teachers would be able

[3] The Malaysian Examination Syndicate

to tell that it is in this section that many Malaysian students fail as good writers since they tend to reach for bombastic words that disregard nuances and fail to convey meanings effectively. Others overuse certain words throughout the written product, indicating a poor command of vocabulary or mere inability to use the language appropriately. Though, there are several factors that contribute towards the making of a good piece of writing, Laufer (1986) argues that if fluency is understood as "the ability to convey a message with ease and comprehensibility, then vocabulary adequacy and accuracy matter more than grammatical correctness" (cited in Zimmerman, 1997, p. 122). Besides, experienced readers, writers, and teachers would be able to say that written production need not necessarily reflect richness in vocabulary, but at the least exhibit careful manipulation of suitable words that would carry the message across most appropriately and succinctly.

The ultimate goal of language teaching is to bring learners to the point where they can use both spoken and written English in an autonomous fashion and for their own purpose in the world at large. Language enrichment activities and their attendant exercises in such planned programmes can and must be challenging as well as meaningful for learners to see the importance of expanding their vocabularies both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, such activities cannot exist in a vacuum, with vocabulary words given out of context and learned by rote. Activities must be framed in contexts which are meaningful because they are interesting to students. Through involvement with imaginative literature, ESL learners benefit by reading language rich in concepts and lexis and by stretching to respond to it with their own discourse. Literature as a rich and widely appealing source of material for language competence and writing as an autonomous and individualised activity in language work make for an ideal partnership on which a second language syllabus can be based (Brumfit & Roberts, 1981, p. 105). However, a brief retrospective of why this is fraught with considerable difficulties in Malaysia is in order here.

This "ideal partnership" of literature in English and the teaching of ESL is hardly a recent concept. But its practice was virtually truncated in Malaysia with the introduction of the Education Enactment Bill 1971, when by 1975, the emphasis on the teaching and learning of English was significantly diminished in the interests of the officially designated national language, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay) (Rosli, Ain & Nora , 1996, p. 1). . Increasing concerns about building a stronger national identity after independence in 1957, prompted the ever increasing hegemony of the Malay language with class hours in the public schools committed to the teaching of English being reduced from the primary to the tertiary level by the mid 70's.

Further erosion of the general study and the use of English occurred when it no longer was a required subject to pass a major government examination to progress to the next level of education. As a result, the new generation of Malaysians have little, poor or no command of English. Along with this general trend was the decline- indeed almost the total eclipse- of attention to literature in English. It is all too observable today that most of the population under the age of forty has little or no acquaintance with the world pantheon of so-called "Great Literature"--*pro forma* in the secondary schools before the language mandates of the 1970's diminished the study and the use of English in favour of Malay.

In recent years however, ESL teaching of English has been given increasingly more attention. A natural impetus is that Malaysia as a rapidly developing nation is fully aware of the phenomenon of the world as a "global village" and the incontrovertible fact that English is the *lingua franca* of communication not only in the United Nations and the diplomatic world, but also in the international business, information technology, and science.

With the advent of Vision 2020, Malaysia's clearly articulated dream for becoming a fully developed nation, Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in his working paper "Malaysia: The Way Forward" summarised the articles of the vision by urging that

> Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, spiritually, psychologically, and culturally.
>
> (Mahathir, 1991).

Indeed, the leaders of the nation have consistently been aware of the fact that English is essential not only on the practical arenas of national life as the nation interacts with the global village, but also in the realm of spiritual development. In concert with this advocacy of literature as the humane science, Anwar Ibrahim, in his book *The Asian Renaissance*, (1996) warns that Malaysians, currently given to an overwhelmingly materialistic outlook, are being swallowed by what he calls "the rising tide of philistinism," a phenomenon which seriously compromises the nation's potential for fulfilling its goals for the country's holistic development (p. 30). He urges virtually immediate rectification of the situation by reinstating literature in society and by teaching literature to children as early as possible. Warning that "even as we are becoming richer economically, we are becoming poorer culturally," he is adamant in declaring that:

> The pressing concern of our society today is to arrest the waning interest in literature itself . . . Apart form religion, it is literature that will enable us to regain the fullness of humanity . . . given the right attitude and the requisite commitment, the possibilities for cultural enrichment through literature are indeed limitless. In the realm of education, measures should be taken to enable students to be exposed to the great works of world literature as early as possible (p. 86).

Clearly, along with the pragmatic reasons for the revival of emphasis on ESL in Malaysia, there comes once again to the fore among the leaders and educators of the nation the recognition that the universality of literature helps learners deal with all experiences -- worldly or spiritual. In tandem with the ideological aspect of the argument in favour of literature in the English Language curriculum, is the pedagogical reality that the context within which imaginative literature operates --apart from being experientially enriching -- exposes learners to a wide and "rich" variety of linguistic corpus.

In response to the campaign for cultural literacy in Malaysia, the Language Unit of the Ministry of Education has been continuously promoting literature within the public education system. Working with scholars and academicians, it has funded and promoted the development of the English Language Reader Programme and the Class Reader Programme (CRP). The CRP involves consortia of educator teams which debate about and select classics of world literature, edit them for adaptation according to learner levels, and create carefully designed teaching files to assist teachers in using literature in the English Language classrooms. Still, much work remains to be done. The advocacy of cultural literacy is continually undermined by several factors operating in the Malaysian society in general and in the school system in particular. A cogent feature article in the Education Section of the newspaper by Ganakumaran Subramaniam entitled "Clearing the Literature Haze" (NST, 1997) provided considerable insight into the problems with which the well-intentioned effort is fraught. He points out that "the first problem contributing to the perpetuation of the literature "haze" concerns perceptions, fallacies and apprehensions about the learning and teachings of literature. Ganakumaran (1997) notes such persistent misunderstandings about who can "learn it" the perils of "taking it" and even about what literature is by offering the following examples:"

> 'The stories in literature are not real, so why read them?'
> 'Literature is too difficult; your English must be really good to do literature,"
> 'You only study Chaucer and Shakespeare when you do literature.'

The second problem is especially trenchant; it can be heard among the teachers themselves: "I never did literature myself. How do you expect me to teach it at all, let alone well?" Indeed, in spite of efforts and good intentions of those involved in the CRP, the teaching files were often consigned to school libraries or take up space locked in school textbook cases ironically kept "under wraps" to prolong their life-span but instead perpetuating the "haze."

The dismal outcome is that literature in English as a subject is referred to colloquially in Malaysia as "Literature with the Big L", prompting further laments on the part of the intelligentsia and the educational practitioners about the waning or non-existent interests in books in general and literature in particular. In spite of the good intentions of the various programmes to promote literature in English in the schools, the language and literature teachers' ability to use the programmes already developed remains for the most part unnutured and a consequence largely untapped.

Concluding his analysis of the literature haze in Malaysia, Ganakumaran (1997) summarises the advocacy of literature in English in the classrooms by the country's leaders and educators as well as his own maintaining that:

> To instil a sense of morality in our students and to allow them to empathise with others through the understanding and appreciation of life as depicted in [great] literary works seems reason enough to study literature. How much closer would one work towards achieving the aspirations of the National Education Policy in developing holistic individuals? (p. 23).

In fact, the advocacy for literature will continue to exist in a vacuum and with faint credibility if administrators and educators fail to address the problems discussed above. It is important that they give due attention to pedagogical theories and practices that are sufficiently sensible and yet engaging to diffuse the current mistaken perception that "literature with the Big L" is an esoteric discipline to be undertaken only by advanced students with high levels of English language competence. By further disregarding the problem, the authorities are only contributing towards the perpetual haze whereby, teachers would continually fear to teach the subject, with students and parents who persist in their self perpetuating fallacies about who can "learn it," and scepticism rules the day.