



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**ESL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE LEARNING OF
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH**

JOHN CHACKO

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**MASTER OF ARTS
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LITERATURE IN ENGLISH**

By

JOHN CHACKO

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
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of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

**ESL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE LEARNING OF
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By

JOHN CHACKO

June 2007

Chairman: Wan Roselezam binti Wan Yahya, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

The study attempts to find out the perceptions of learners in the Malaysian context towards the learning of literature in English through the use of the instructional and language-based approaches. There is a necessity to increase our understanding and awareness of the relationship between learner and teacher related factors like instructional and language-based approaches. In the Malaysian context, the learning of literature in English has an important role especially in a multiracial class that has linguistic, cultural and social differences.

The respondents involved in this study were 100 Form Four learners of literature in English in an urban secondary school. To elicit their responses, questionnaires were distributed and interviews were conducted. These questionnaires were designed to obtain information regarding their demographic and educational background and more importantly their perceptions towards the learning of literature in English in relation to the instructional and language-based determinants. Descriptive statistics



were used to analyse Section A and Section B that contained the demographic variables of the samples. Items in Section C of the questionnaire were measured based on a four-point Likert-type. Inferential statistics (*t*-test) were used to determine the group differences regarding the perceptions of the respondents across gender for the determinants.

On the whole, the findings of the survey show that the respondents agreed to most of the instructional and the language-based determinants as being suitable for the learning of literature in English. The analysis of the perceptions of the respondents showed that pedagogically the instructional approach was considered a better approach in the learning of literature in English. The analysis of the perceptions of the respondents towards the instructional determinants across gender showed a significant difference for two determinants. The female respondents perceived the sociopolitical and mythological determinants to be important in the learning of literature in English than their male counterparts. The analysis across gender for the language-based determinants showed that there were four significantly different determinants. The female respondents perceived the role-play, storytelling and skits, student presentation, summary and guided-writing determinants to be important in the learning of literature in English than their male counterparts while the male respondents perceived debates and forums to be a suitable determinant for learning literature than the female respondents. Implications and suggestions for further research to enhance the learning of literature in English are considered.



The instructional and language-based approaches encourage self-directed learning, where the learners take on responsibility for their learning of literature. These approaches reduce the learners' dependence on their teachers and encourage greater independence on the learners' part. Learners will be more aware of the process involved in learning, thus enabling them to make conscious efforts in learning literature. At the same time, learners are motivated, their self-esteem high and are constantly reinforced. They become engaged in a variety of activities. The focus of this kind of experience should be in helping learners to learn how to equip themselves with tools to understand and comprehend the learning of literature. These approaches will provide valuable ideas, insights and activities to learn the literature component as a whole.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**PERSPEKTIF PELAJAR-PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI
BAHASA KEDUA TERHADAP PEMBELAJARAN KESUSASTERAAN
DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS**

Oleh

JOHN CHACKO

Jun 2007

Pengerusi: Wan Roselezam binti Wan Yahya, PhD

Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti persepsi pelajar terhadap pembelajaran Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris dalam kelas-kelas ESL (Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua) melalui dua pembolehubah (variables) iaitu pendekatan 'instructional' dan pendekatan 'language-based'. Kefahaman dan kesedaran tentang perhubungan di antara pelajar dan faktor-faktor seperti pendekatan 'instructional' dan pendekatan 'language-based' adalah diperlukan dalam memahami dan menguasai Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris memainkan peranan penting dalam masyarakat majmuk negara yang mempunyai pelbagai linguistik, kebudayaan dan sosial. Dalam konteks Malaysia, pembelajaran Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris akan menjana minat mendalam terhadap matapelajaran tersebut dan seterusnya memotivasikan para pelajar.

Responden yang terlibat dalam kajian ini terdiri daripada pelajar-pelajar Tingkatan Empat. Soal selidik dan temuduga telah dijalankan untuk mendapat maklumat dari



100 orang pelajar. Soal selidik digunakan untuk mendapat maklumat berkaitan demografik dan latarbelakang pelajar-pelajar serta persepsi mereka terhadap dua pembolehubah (variables) tersebut. Proses pencungkilan maklumat ini disusuli dengan temuduga untuk mengetahui dengan lebih dekat lagi persepsi pelajar-pelajar terhadap pembelajaran Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Statistik secara deskriptif digunakan untuk menganalisa Bahagian A dan Bahagian B. Bahagian C mengandungi item berdasarkan Skala Likert di mana nilai terbahagi kepada empat kategori. Statistik berbentuk 'inferential' (*t*-test) digunakan untuk menentukan perbezaan persepsi responden menurut jantina.

Analisis persepsi responden menunjukkan bahwa dari segi pedagogi, pendekatan 'instructional' merupakan pembolehubah yang lebih berkesan untuk pembelajaran Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Bagi pendekatan 'instructional', analisis persepsi menunjukkan perbezaan yang ketara untuk dua penentu. Responden wanita lebih mementingkan unsur-unsur sosiopolitik dan mitologi dalam pembelajaran Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris berbanding dengan responden lelaki. Manakala bagi pendekatan 'language-based', analisis persepsi menunjukkan perbezaan yang ketara untuk empat penentu. Responden wanita lebih mementingkan unsur-unsur lakonan, pembentangan pelajar dan penulisan manakala responden lelaki lebih mementingkan unsur perbahasan dan forum. Implikasi serta cadangan-cadangan untuk pembelajaran Kesusasteraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris yang lebih berkesan telah juga dipertimbangkan.

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Approval Sheet No. 1

I certify that an Examination Committee met on 13 December 2007 to conduct the final examination of John Chacko on his Master of Arts degree thesis entitled “ESL Learners’ Perceptions Towards the Learning of Literature in English” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree of Master of Arts.

Members of the Examination Committee were as follows:

Tan Bee Hoon, PhD

Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Jayakaran a/l Mukundan, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Shamala a/p Paramasivam, PhD

Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Siti Hamin Stapa, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Humanities and Social Science
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
(External Examiner)

HASANAH MOHD GHAZALI, PhD

Professor and Deputy Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 22 November 2007



This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Wan Roselezam binti Wan Yahya, PhD

Lecturer

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

Universiti Putra Malaysia

(Chairman)

Associate Professor Wong Bee Eng, PhD

Lecturer

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

Universiti Putra Malaysia

(Member)

AINI IDERIS, PhD

Professor and Dean

School of Graduate Studies

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 13 December 2007



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background to the Study

In the Malaysian English context, where the English language functions as a second language, learning literature in English is not easy. This difficulty arises because learning literature in English as a second language (ESL) class poses many language challenges. Also, the lack of a positive attitude among students towards the subject, shortage of suitable texts, numerically large classes and insufficient resources for teachers (Rosli Talif, 1995) compound the problem.

The lack of interest in literature is very visible. For the past one decade there has been a steady decline in the number of students sitting for the literature paper in the Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) examinations. In 2001 out of 330, 667 students (Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001, p.23) who took the SPM examinations, only 715 (2.14%) signed up for the English Literature paper (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2003). Apart from the change in the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia, there has been little attempt to re-examine the nature of the learning of literature in English through independent and resourceful learning approaches (Gurnam Kaur, 1995). The development of such learning approaches may help to revive and instill interest in reading literature especially among learners in second language classes.



It has been said that learners who are exposed to creative teaching ideas and approaches have more variety in their responses and this view was confirmed by Peters (1970). He believes that teaching with ingenuity provides the teacher with opportunities to look at any literary work from diverse angles. The teacher has to provide the impetus to create an awakening session that makes learners realize reading literature enriches the mind. The flexibility of thinking inspirationally includes the elaboration of a variety of novel or original ideas, which help to solve problems. It would therefore be necessary for teachers to strive to be creative in their thinking.

As literature in English often deals with the abstract, it may be difficult for second language learners to express their thoughts and feelings. This can be overcome by allowing learners to view films as the visual forms can help in better comprehension of the texts and also aid them to recall what they had seen (Tucker, 1996). The learners can become active participants during discussions as they can link what they had seen with what they have read. The learners are able to interpret a text according to their own beliefs, outlook and experiences (Murdoch, 1992). As the teaching approaches are changed into more creative methods, learners will be aided in moving up the ladder of cognitive skills i.e. from knowledge-based understanding to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. They would move from a 'lower order' i.e. knowledge-based learning that made them recognize to a 'higher order' that would emphasize a more creative role like evaluating and interpreting literary texts (Vethamani, 2000).



As literature is making a comeback into the Malaysian classroom, it becomes the foremost task of the literature teacher to devise lessons creatively to engage the learners' interest. By cultivating positive perceptions towards diverse approaches to the learning of literature in English, the literature student will have at his disposal alternative ways to seek an understanding of literary texts on his own. These approaches can promote the self-realization of the learner by synthesizing and integrating his imaginative, intellectual, emotional and physical capacities (Lyton, 1971).

1.1 Historical Overview of literature in the Malaysian Context

The language policy of the country was determined with the introduction of the Razak Report (1956). This report became a milestone in the history of education in the country. The main language proposals in the Report were that the Malay language became a compulsory subject in all national schools, as it was the national language and that English was to be a compulsory subject because of its utilitarian value.

Prior to Independence, English Literature and English language were taught as two separate subjects in the school curriculum. The distinctive aspect of English language teaching in Malaysia, as compared with English teaching in British schools, is that the language class is a separate one from the literature class. The former emphasizes high proficiency and communicative abilities in the language whereas the latter emphasizes the study of literature for literature's sake (Suraya



Ali, 1995). English Literature had always been a popular subject in the English medium schools despite the fact that English Literature was taught as a separate optional subject from the English language subject. The syllabus was typical of those offered in the Cambridge O Level Examination and the emphasis was on the study of literature for literature's sake (Rosli Talif, 1992, p.12). According to Suraya Ali (1995) this was due to the assumption that literature was only for those 'elitist' few who were competent in English language and the culture together with the ability to understand the nuances and subtleties of the language. These preconceived ideas of literature might also have caused the decrease in the number of students taking literature in the 70s. With this change, English language became a second language subject. Literature in English was included in the teaching of the English language and was taught as one lesson per week. However, English Literature was maintained as an elective and offered in public examinations, Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) and Higher School Certificate (HSC), later known as SPM and STPM.

The Language Act (1967) changed the status of the English language. Bahasa Malaysia replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools. After 1970, the single forty-minute lesson devoted to literature in English was used for the English language. This was necessary as the Ministry of Education was of the view that extra English lessons would help to overcome the problem of the decline in the English language. It was thought that the decline in the quality of English was caused by the change in the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia. The fact that English was taught only as a single subject also indirectly



undermined the important role of English (Rosli Talif, 1995). Therefore it was hardly surprising that over the years the numbers of students opting for literature continued to decline. In many schools, literature has totally disappeared from the curriculum and appeared to exist in rudimentary forms in the reading class (Suraya Ali 1995, p.55). According to Vethamani (1991), in 1988 only 57 schools in Malaysia offered literature to Form Five students and there were only 355 students who sat for the paper in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examinations throughout the country. These students were mostly in the urban schools that used to be missionary run-secondary schools. In short, the literature class appeared to remain an elite class. In 2002, only 60 students nationwide sat for the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) Literature paper (Ganankumaran, 2002). With the conversion in the medium of instruction, the contact time for English in secondary schools had been drastically cut from 1780 minutes to merely 210 minutes per week (Samah, 1986). The language conversion programme had inevitably affected the amount and the quality used. This switch in the medium of instruction and the students' lackadaisical attitude towards learning a second language have all been highlighted as the main causes for the decline in the standards of English among the students (Rosli Talif, 1995).

Due to public concern for the continuing drop in the standard of English and the recognition of English as an international language and a communicative link with the world of science and technology, there was a resurgence of interest in English education in the 1980s. This proved to be a catalyst for the Ministry of Education to take positive steps to arrest the declining standard of English among Malaysian



students. In 1976, the Ministry introduced Communicative English Language Syllabus in which the aim was to enable learners to become more proficient in communicative skills at both written and spoken levels. In the communicative syllabus too, the importance of literature was again over-looked, as there was no lesson allocated for the teaching of literature. However, literature was still offered and taught in a few urban schools especially in the missionary and residential schools and the students from these schools sat for the literature paper at the MCE and HSC examinations. Many schools back then had decided against the teaching of literature and the reasons cited were lack of interest among students to pursue the subject, shortage of sufficiently qualified teachers to teach literature in English, lack of suitable texts for Malaysian students, the change in the medium of instruction from English to Malay and the newly qualified TESL (Teaching of English as a Second language) teachers did not have the training or exposure to teach English Literature (Rosli Talif, 1995).

In 1988, realising the decline in the standard of the English language, despite its status as the second official language, the cornerstone of the English language curriculum was set. In keeping the line with the newly formulated National Philosophy of Education, the Ministry of Education introduced Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) in 1988, which marked as a watershed for the development of literature in English. Literature in English was reintroduced into the secondary school curriculum. It was incorporated into the English Language Syllabus at the secondary level. More emphasis was given to English language lessons with the implementation of this new curriculum. There was a renewed call



for the revival of Literature in English. The infusion of literary elements was laid out in the objectives of the KBSM English Language Syllabus:

‘At the end of the secondary school, the students would be able to ... read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment, write true and imaginary stories..., write dialogue..., write poems and plays.

(KBSM English Language Syllabus, MoE, 1988, p.2)

Since 1989, one lesson every week has been used to teach literature in English in secondary schools. This was the result of the two circulars that were issued by the Ministry. They were ‘Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil 17/1988 dated 24 November 1988’ and ‘Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil 5/1989 dated 18 February 1989’. The main intention of the Ministry was ‘to develop in the students’ attitudes and abilities that will enable them to respond to literary work’ (KBSM Syllabus, 1988). In the first circular (24 November 1988) it was explicitly stated that at the end of the English Language Programme, students should be able to “read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment”. The urgency of the Ministry became more apparent when the Class Reader Programme (CRP) was introduced in 1990. The CRP was fully operational in all secondary schools by 1995.

‘In its initial effort to introduce literature as a component in the English Language syllabus at the secondary level in Malaysia, the Ministry of Education embarked on the CRP.’

(Rosli Talif, 1995)



The CRP would be the basis for literacy understanding and appreciation and that it would eventually prepare learners for possible literature study in the coming years (Rosli Talif, 1995). And this proved to be the impetus for the implementation in the English Language Curriculum for Malaysian Secondary Schools. There were four reasons for the introduction of the CRP. They were to expose students to materials written in English, to motivate students to read and to inculcate in them the reading habit, to help students increase their language proficiency and to generate interest in and prepare students for possible literature study (Rosli Talif, 1995, p.85).

The CRP that was introduced as a precursor to the present literature in English Component programme was divided into two phases. The first phase began in 1992 and ended in 1995. The content and backgrounds of the texts were mainly foreign as in *The Pearl*, *The Village by The Sea*, *Julius Caesar* etc. The second phase began in 1995 and ended in 1998 and the contents and background of the texts were of a similar nature. Jayakaran (1993) states that students encountered comprehension difficulties because of the differences in the cultural background (p.18). Apart from that, these texts were often loaded with literary learning that was irrelevant to the second language learner and unrelated to their everyday lives. These books in the CRP programme had to be imported at exorbitant prices, as such the ineffective implementation of the programme (Jayakaran, 1993). The Elective Literature in English Programme (ELEP) was implemented in 1991 whereby Form Four and Five students were encouraged to opt for the subject at SPM level (Literature in English Syllabus, 1991). Students who opt for these two years programme are required to study selected poems, short stories, a play and a novel from a set of



prescribed texts. Under the new syllabus, literature as a subject is still offered as an elective at the upper secondary level but all attempts would be made to make literature more accessible to students despite their proficiency level rather than to just a minority group. Perhaps the positive upshot of this programme is that it gradually ceases to be a subject taken only by the elite.

A single forty-minute lesson was used for the CRP and it was taught as a complement to the English language subject. Students were divided into groups and each group of students was given a particular class reader to read and analyse for a term. Therefore at the end of the year, each student should have had the opportunity to read at least three books. It is also important to note that the CRP was designed to motivate students to read the readers at home (Rosli Talif, 1995).

In 1998, with a view towards improving the knowledge and standard of literature, the Director of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Dr. Nor Azmi suggested that the English language syllabus be literature enriched (NST, 15 August 1998). The English language syllabus should contain literary genres like poetry and drama as these would add variety to learning like the English language (Kamalanathan, 1999, p.25). The suggestion made by the Director was later taken up and became one of the four objectives of the KBSM English Language Programme.

‘At the end of the KBSM English Language Programme, the student should be able to read and understand prose for information and enjoyment.’

(KBSM English Language Syllabus, MoE, 1988, p.2)

