



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**COPING STRATEGIES IN LEARNING LITERATURE:  
A SURVEY OF UNIMAS TESL AND ESL STUDENTS**

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**Bachelor of Education with Honours  
(Teaching English as Second Language)  
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## Statement of Originality

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled  
**“Coping Strategies in Learning Literature:  
A Survey of UNIMAS TESL and ESL Students”**  
is to the best of the author’s knowledge that of the author except  
where due reference is made.

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(Date submitted)

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**COPING STRATEGIES IN LEARNING LITERATURE:  
A SURVEY OF UNIMAS TESL AND ESL STUDENTS**

LAU PHEK HUNG

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a  
Bachelor of Education with Honours  
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Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development  
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2009

The project entitled 'Coping Strategies in Learning Literature: A Survey of UNIMAS TESL and ESL Students' was prepared by Lau Phek Hung and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching English as Second Language).

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **COPING STRATEGIES IN LEARNING LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY OF UNIMAS TESL AND ESL STUDENTS**

**LAU PHEK HUNG**

This study aimed at finding out UNIMAS TESL and ESL undergraduates' perceptions of learning literature, the difficulties that the undergraduates experience in literature learning and the coping strategies that they use to overcome the problems that they encountered in learning the literature. The participants of this study were 74 Universiti Malaysia Sarawak students who are taking the education course.

For the purpose of this study, two instruments were used for data collection. Questionnaire was used as the primary instrument and it was distributed to all the 74 undergraduates. Interview was used as the secondary instrument and only 15 of them were selected to take part in the interview sessions. Percentage and frequency count was used in analyzing the data.

The overall findings illustrated that most of the undergraduates like to study literature although some of them are not fond of studying literature. The results demonstrated that the students experienced many difficulties in learning the literature and they used many coping strategies to cope with the difficulties encountered in learning the literature.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **CARA-CARA MENGATASI KESUSAHAN DALAM PEMBELAJARAN LITERATURE**

**LAU PHEK HUNG**

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti tanggapan mahasiswa/mahasiswi TESL dan ESL dalam pembelajaran literature, kesusahan yang dihadapi semasa belajar and cara-cara yang digunakan untuk mengatasi kesusahan dalam pembelajaran literature. Responen untuk kajian ini adalah 59 TESL dan 15 ESL mahasiswi atau mahasiswa.*

*Untuk tujuan kajian ini, 2 instrumen telah digunakan untuk mangumpul data. Borang kajianselidik deedarkan kepada semua TESL dan ESL mahasiswi/mahasiswa. Hanya 15 mahsiswi atau mahasiswa depilih untuk temeubual.*

*Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kebayakkan pelajar suka belajar literature walaupun sekumpulan daripada mereke mengatakan bahawa mereka tidak suka literature. Ada sekumpulan juga mengatakan mereka belajar literaturehanya untuk tujuan examination. Selain itu, hasil kajian ini juga manunjukkan bahawa para pelejar menemui pelbagai kesusahan semasa belajar literature dan cara-cara yang digunakkan untuk menyelesaikan masalah yang dihadapi.*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Chapter preview**

This opening chapter intends to provide an overview of the project. First, the background of the study is discussed. Following closely is the elaboration of the statement of problem which identifies issues arises from the background of the study. Next, the description of the research objective is explained and the significance of the study is conveyed in order to show the overall view of the rationale for the study to be carried out. The scope of the project is also stated to demonstrate the boundaries the study covers. Then, the definition of key terms used throughout the project aims is also elucidated to provide a clearer picture to the audience for the understanding of the project. Lastly, a chapter review of sections is also covered.

## **1.1 Introduction**

Literature can be defined as literary works drawn from short stories, poetry, novels, and play (Lazar, 1993). Literature has many benefits towards the learning of English language and it is not surprisingly that the government had decided to make the Literature component compulsory in both upper and lower secondary school with the implementation of Literature Components in both PMR and SPM public examinations.

Literature is full of examples of real-life language in different situations and offers a variety of models for communication (McKay, 1982). Hence, literature is not only interesting to the students, but also facilitates the integration of the language skills. This is because literature provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Students will gain familiarity with the features of the writing texts after the long run of reading the literary texts. This will in turn broaden and enrich the students' writing skill.

In addition, literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is important in the sense that it defines something about fundamental human issues. Literary texts such as short stories, plays and dramas offer a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted (Lazar, 1993). Thus, the reading of the literary texts allow the students to discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions, beliefs, fears, enjoyments and so forth behind closed doors. This vivid imagined world can provide the students, especially the ESL learners with a feeling of codes and preoccupations that structure a real society.

Moreover, literature can help students to instill the aesthetic value so that they can learn to appreciate more the nature of literature as literature (Brumfit & Carter, 1999). This allows the students to be engaged with the specific purpose of reading and making interpretation. By interpreting as well as appreciating the contents of the discourse, it can contribute to an important role of making language study and learning vital.

## **1.2 Background of the study**

Despite the numerous advantages of learning literature in an ESL classroom, the learning of the literature subject is getting more and more challenging. Even the government make the crucial move by making the literature component compulsory in secondary schools to encourage the students to read more English texts and lately with the introduction of the teaching of Mathematics and Sciences in English, there is still no much interest in learning literature. There are many factors which could contribute to this situation; mainly the students' perception of learning literature. Most of the students view literature as something complex and hard to understand (Talif, 1995). The syllabus on the literature component can be looked into again to ensure that it is interesting enough for the students as students find literature boring (Sage, 1987). There might be a small possibility that the current syllabus could be revised to suit the interest of the learners.

Most importantly, the study will look into the undergraduates' perception of learning literature as they hold the responsibility to educate the young minds and thus it is essential for the undergraduates to know their own perceptions of learning the literature. When the trainee teachers know they own perception and the rationales the existence of such perception, they will be able to put themselves in their students' shoes and present the

material in an exciting and fun manner. Besides, this study will also find out the difficulties that the TESL and ESL students encounter in learning the literature and the coping strategies that they will use so that the problems can be solved.

### **1.3 Research problem**

Many previous studies have looked at students' perceptions and acceptance of learning literature in secondary schools. These studies also investigated on the coping strategies that the students will use when they encounter problem in learning literature. This is evident in the findings of Siti Aminah Abu Bakar (1999 as cited in Sidhu, 2000) that most of the students do not like to study literature. The study was conducted at Sekolah Menengah Seri Ampang, Seremban through the use of questionnaire where the sample population was 100 Form Four students. Only 21 out of 100 students conveyed their interest in learning literature while most of them noted they are forced to study literature for the purpose of examination. When they encounter problem in literature learning, 45% of them pointed out that they would choose the strategy of attending literature classes while 23% students claimed that they would consult their teachers immediately to clear their doubts in literature. 15% of them stated that they would consult their elder siblings or classmates whereas 25% of the students would give up when they faced with problem in literature learning. They would also search for relevant reference books as a way to solve the problems meet which contributed to 15%. Although the findings of coping strategies are provided in this study, it is not adequate for the reference of other students, especially the trainee teacher and university students. This is because possible strategies that the sample population used may not suitable for the university students and trainee teachers as secondary students generally are more dependent in learning.

Chacko (2007) conducted a similar study on 150 Form Four and Form Five students of two urban secondary schools at Thailand. He found out that 70% of the students are not fond of literature as they explained that they were not exposed to the literature component when they were young. As such, they further elaborated that it was too difficult for them to understand and interpret the text. Additionally, they do not like reading. As this study aimed to find out the students' perceptions of learning literature and the difficulties that they face with in learning literature, thus it did not provide findings about the coping strategies that the students use to cope with the problems encounter. As such, there is a need for the researcher to discover more about the coping strategies that the students or even the trainee teachers can use in dealing with the difficulty face with.

In a study which involved 26 secondary teachers and 420 Form One to Form Five students in the area of Johor Bahru, Tina Abdullah, Mohammad Hassan Zakaria, Faziah Ismail, Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor and Marzilah Abdul Aziz (2007) found that all the students had positive perception and attitudes towards learning literature. More than 70% of them felt that it was necessary to learn literature in English as they believed that by reading literary texts in English, they would be able to learn new words which would eventually help to improve their language proficiency. The findings of this study also revealed that the students preferred interactive teaching and learning environment in literature lessons. More than 70% of them were interested to learn literature using computer technology and 80% of them affirmed that they liked to use the strategy of group discussion in learning literature. Additionally, majority of them (86%) conveyed that they like to learn literature by watching movies or plays that are related to the literary texts read. They would also rely on using bilingual dictionaries when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary and related what they have learnt to their real life.

There are very few studies that look into the trainee teachers' perception of learning literature. Based on a study done by Mohd Annuar Abdullah (2004) on third-year UNIMAS TESL students which aimed to find out the problems that the students face with in learning literature, 30 out of 37 students were found interested in learning literature. They were very keen during literature lessons as they believed that they could broaden their world view and knowledge by sharing their thoughts of literary texts with others. The minority pre-service teachers who were not fan of literature expressed that they did not perceive literature like other useful or important subjects such as Science, Mathematics and English because they could not apply what they have learnt in their daily life. They remarked that they were forced to study literature for the purpose of examination. However, this study did not investigate on the possible strategies that the students can use in managing the learning of the literature subject. Therefore, this study is proposed with the hope to provide the trainee teachers with more information on the coping strategies that are effective and useful.

Most of the studies mentioned above presented findings about secondary school students' feeling of learning literature. Besides, the findings of coping strategies presented by the previous studies above are insufficient. Thus, there is a need to look at the trainee teachers' perception of learning literature and how they cope with the subject. This is essential as the trainee teachers will be going out to teach the English literature component and the findings of this study can serve as a reference for them in the education field. This proposed study also hopes to find out the similarities and differences of the coping strategies that utilize by the three ability groups of undergraduates and relate with their achievement in literature examinations. It is hope to find out the coping strategies that can assist the undergraduates to solve their problem effectively and improve their performance in literature.

#### **1.4 Aim and objective of the study**

The general aim of this study is to find out the types of coping strategies that the trainee teachers employ in learning literature. It attempts to look into the undergraduates' perception of learning literature. Furthermore, this study also endeavors to explore the different strategies that the TESL and ESL undergraduates use when trying to deal with the subject. Its main focus is to examine the coping strategies of UNIMAS pre-service and in-service teachers who will be going out to teach English literature component. The questionnaires are distributed to 59 fourth-year TESL and 15 third-year ESL students who are taking the course of education in UNIMAS and studying literature as compulsory subject. From the questionnaires, 15 respondents are selected for an in-depth session of interview which takes about 20-30 minutes.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the undergraduates' perception of learning literature
2. To identify the difficulties that the UNIMAS TESL and ESL students encounter in learning literature
3. To highlight the coping strategies employed by the high scorer, intermediate students and the weak students

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of learning literature?
2. What are the difficulties that the students encounter in learning literature?
3. What are the coping strategies that the students utilize? Do the coping strategies differ between the successful students, intermediate students and those who do not perform well in literature?

## **1.5 Significance of the study**

This study might provide a better insight for the students on the strategies that they can use in literature learning. This is crucial because literature students always encounter problem in the learning process and this will directly affect their interest and motivation in learning literature. Furthermore, literature learning is not easy especially for ESL learners. Thus, the finding of this study is hoped to provide some techniques that can assist the literature students to cope with the subject better.

Also, the finding of this study endeavors to highlight the coping strategies employ by the high scorers, intermediate students and the weak students who do not perform well in literature. Comparison of the coping strategies that the three abilities groups of undergraduates utilize in term of similarities and differences is done to highlight the relationship between the coping strategies used and their ability level in literature. The findings obtained are vital as there is still no relevant study related to it and the results achieved can provide students with the knowledge of which coping strategies can ensure them with the most effective outcome.

Moreover, it is also hoped that the finding can be served as reference for literature teachers and students in the teaching and learning process. With provision of such information, the teachers will be able to achieve desired results in the teaching process as teachers and students will be motivated to seek additional information on coping strategies that can enhance students learning and participation in literature. This may develop new innovations and a more creative technique that adds to the existing strategies of literature learning.

## **1.6 Operational definition of terms**

### **1.6.1 Coping strategies**

In a research done by Collins and Onwuegbuzie (2008), coping strategies is explained as cognitive and behavioural strategies that individuals employ for the purpose of managing the atmosphere of surroundings and overcome the difficulties faced. In this study, coping strategies are referring to the technique or method that the students utilize to cope with the difficulties in learning literature and gain better understanding of the subject matter. It is also referred as the learning style that the students prefer in learning literature.

### **1.6.2 Literature**

Literature is seen as a potential and reliable source of information for students in a language learning classroom. It is defined as an art which enables people to expand and refine their understanding of life (Elkins, n.d) while Lazar (1993) defined literature as a literary work drawn from short stories, poetry, novel and plays. These literary works exposed learners to have a variety of literary texts that help learners to value the differences among cultures and groups. In this study, literature refers to the literary texts such as poems, novels, plays, short stories and dramas that are taught in the literature courses offered by UNIMAS in the education course that the TESL and ESL undergraduates take.

### **1.6.3 UNIMAS TESL and ESL students**

In this study, UNIMAS TESL and ESL refer to the pre-service teachers or the in-service teachers who are taking the course

of education in UNIMAS. They are the trainee teachers in their final year at UNIMAS who will be going out to teach English literature component. They are also known as the ESL learners who are required to learn the literature as a compulsory subject in order to fulfill the requirement upon completion of their programme in the campus. All of the 59 TESL and 15 ESL students are the sample population of this study.

#### **1.6.4 High scorer**

In this study, the high scorers refer to those who are the successful students who perform well in the literature lessons. They are the high scorers in literature examinations who always achieve A or A- in three quarter of the literature tests or examinations that they have sat for. Three quarter is used as the measurement as the stability of students' performance can be confirmed and determined when the students are able to achieve the particular grade frequently. This unit of measurement is used to categorize the sample population into three ability levels.

#### **1.6.5 Intermediate student**

The intermediate students are those who acquire the grade B+, B or B- in three quarter of the literature courses that they have taken. They are the intermediate students who are less competence in the subject of literature compared to the advanced group of students.

### **1.6.6 Weak students**

Weak students in this study are defined as those who achieve the grade between C and C+ in three quarter of the literature tests or examinations that they have taken. They are the least competent students in the subject matter and have numerous difficulties in literature learning. They might not know the suitable strategies to use in overcoming the difficulties encountered.

## **1.7 Scope of the study**

This study is carried out with the intentions to determine students' coping strategies when dealing with the subject of literature. In addition, this study will also identify the perception of students for having literature as one of the compulsory subjects that they have to take and compare coping strategy that that is employed by the three different proficiency groups of students.

However, this study is only conducted in UNIMAS and is limited to TESL and ESL final year students. Out of 75 students, only 15 students will be selected for an interview session. As such, the result from the findings of this study may not be generalizable to the whole student population.

Furthermore, this study does not examine the difference of coping strategies that the male and female students employed. It is also not the scope of this study to investigate the relationship between the undergraduates' background with their attitudes in learning literature.

Apart from that, this study does not cover students' strategies when coping with other subject matters. It is only based on the subject of

literature. Therefore, the findings of this study may not represent students' strategies when coping with other subject matters.

## **1.8 Chapter review**

Discussion in this opening chapter provides an overview of the project. This opening chapter identifies the background of the study. Next, the problem of this study is discussed after the issues are identified which is followed by aim and objectives as well as research question of the study that provide a clearer picture about the goal of the study. Then, the significance of the study is stated to show the overall view of the rationale for the project to be carried out. The definitions of terms and the scope of the study are listed to provide a clearer picture to the audience for the understanding of the project. It also leads to the study of related literatures in the field which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Chapter preview**

This chapter begins by looking at several interpretations of literature. Then it discusses the significance of studying literature and the literature curriculum. This is followed by the discussion of the problems faced by the students in studying literature and the coping strategies that students employed in learning literature. The review of the literature is to be based on the theoretical knowledge issues concerning the challenges in learning literature in Malaysia ESL classroom as a whole.