

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The Director of Institute Teknologi Mara (ITM), Datuk Zaidee Laidin, lamented in a speech to the staff in 1994, that when he visited a training institute in Germany, he was told that ITM students there were very quiet, they had no questions and they did not speak up in class. Lecturers in some schools at ITM in Shah Alam have the same complaint.

When it comes to speaking up in class, even adults have tremendous problems. When Cohen & Norst (1989), as part of their study, perused the diaries of adult professionals taking foreign language classes as part of their Master's degree course in Migration Studies, they discovered that the diaries showed a degree of fear and anxiety at having to perform before peers and teachers which was "quite unexpected in its intensity and vehemence, only partly alleviated by a caring, non-threatening teacher." (p. 61)

Portin (1993) in a study of Chinese students from China studying in the US found that these students realize that asking questions is important but do not ask questions in the classroom environment because they are unable to express their questions, they are unsure as to whether their questions are appropriate and they

are unsure as to how and when to interrupt a speaker in order to ask their questions. Lacking in oral linguistic competence, they remain silent because they fear confrontation, fear being singled out, fear losing face and fear making a mistake (Portin, 1993).

Bradley & Bradley (1984) say that in terms of duration of silences in a conversation, the Malaysian, Thai or Indonesian usually waits somewhat longer after the other person finishes speaking before he or she speaks than the Australian is likely to do. Hence, compounded with the language difficulty, it is possible that the Australian will think that the Asian has nothing to say.

In a groundbreaking work on ethnic styles in L2 classroom discourse, Sato (1983) looked at the relationship between ethnicity and the distribution of talk in ESL classes consisting of Asian and non-Asian learners. She found significant differences between Asian and non-Asian learners with respect to the distribution of talk. The Asians took significantly fewer speaking turns on their own initiative and were more dependent on teacher-allocated turns in class discussions.

It seems then that the problem is widespread. It gives rise to a question: How will lecturers know that a student has not understood something unless he speaks up? How do students deal with difficulties understanding their lectures or reading material? Do they ask the lecturer? Do they ask questions in class or outside of class? Do they prefer to ask their peers? Do they re-read or read other books to

find simpler explanations or do they just leave their questions unanswered?

For students of school-going age, private tuition centres provide the avenue for students to clarify their problems in understanding. A nationwide survey of tuition centres carried out by Marimuthu et al (1988), seeking to elicit from secondary school students what they view as advantageous in these tuition centres, found that students rated highest on their list, the fact that the tutor let them ask questions and then explained the answers to them. When they did not understand anything in the tuition class they were not afraid to ask; they knew that the teachers would entertain their questions. But in school "... if they [asked] too many questions the teachers [would] get angry and tell them not to disturb them or tell them to ask their friends" (Marimuthu et al, 1988: 167).

1.1 Background of the Study

The Mara Institute of Technology had its genesis in rural development in the form of the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) training institute which was set up in 1956. The name was changed to Institute Teknologi Mara in 1967 and in 1976, it was placed under the Ministry of Education.

The Institute was set up based on the philosophy, as stated in its charter, that all human beings have the natural ability to learn and that education can play an important role in effecting upward mobility on the socio-economic ladder. Through ITM, opportunities were to be made available to Bumiputera students to acquire the professional skills they need to enable them to become competitive and

to become agents of change in national development.

ITM has over three decades expanded through branches set up in 12 states and runs courses at the certificate, diploma, graduate and postgraduate level for full - time and part time students and for distance learning students. Total enrolment of full-time students in the main campus of ITM is about 20,000 and in all of ITM inclusive of its branch campuses in various states, about 40,000.

In 1982, it set up the Centre for Preparatory Studies (PPP) through which twinning programmes were set up with universities in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia and with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Admission of students to this centre and to degree courses offered by ITM is more stringent than it is for the diploma courses. The minimum requirement for the diploma courses is five credits in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) and a pass in Bahasa Malaysia. The stipulation as to which subjects these credits are to be obtained in, varies from school to school, but for diploma courses in the School of Accountancy, where this study is situated, these credits should include Maths and English.

Most of the students come from rural areas or smaller towns and are from families of low socio-economic status. The parents may be, fishermen, security guards, machine operators, clerks or factory workers. The language spoken at home is usually Bahasa Malaysia, the newspapers they read are usually the Bahasa

Malaysia papers and they come from government schools which are in the Malay medium. It is highly unlikely that these students would need to use English for their everyday transactions, such as to buy bread or to get a haircut, in their hometowns. Hence generally their exposure to English is limited. Even at ITM where the student population comprises only Malays, there is no need for students to use English outside of the classroom. There is an increasing number of students who drive cars to college and who carry handphones but these students come from the Klang valley or the bigger towns and from more affluent homes, where English is also spoken, and are still a minority.

Most lectures in ITM are conducted in English, although for some courses students are allowed to write their examinations in Bahasa Malaysia. The majority of reference books are in English. Hence the transition from school to college requires an adjustment on the part of the students from studying in Bahasa Malaysia, the medium of instruction in schools, to studying in English. Students in most schools, including the School of Accountancy, do not go through preparatory courses to equip them for studying in English. They take a placement test to determine which of three levels of English courses, Foundation One, Two or Intermediate, they need and are slotted in accordingly. Students do four to six hours of English per week and cover each level in one semester. By the time they finish three out of the six semesters of their Diploma in Accountancy course they would have finished their English courses. A pass in Intermediate English is compulsory for them to get their diploma.

Table One: Skills, text-types and syllabus items covered in Foundation English One, Foundation English Two and Intermediate English course in ITM.

Skills	FE 1	FE 11	Intermediate
Reading	Informative, descriptive and narrative texts. General English	Informative, descriptive and narrative texts. General English	Informative, argumentative, critical & evaluative texts. General English & academic style texts
Grammar	Simple Tenses Parts of speech Subject-Verb Agreement Basic Sentence Patterns	Simple continuous and perfect tenses. Question forms	Reported speech Passive Voice
Listening and Speaking	Story-telling Listening to & giving instructions. Listening for main idea Describing people, places & things	Role play in social situations Speaking in front of the class. Listening to and understanding short texts.	Role play Forum or Drama Listening for main idea.
Writing	Description and Narration 100-150 words	Exposition 200-250 words	Argumentation and Discussion 350-400 words

(Source: Foundation & Intermediate English Syllabus, ITM, 1996)

Regardless of whether a student has been placed in Foundation English One or Intermediate English level, he is expected to begin his lectures in content area subjects. This practice of allowing students who are not ready in terms of proficiency in the language to begin lectures in their content areas, could explain the classroom anxiety students experience and their extreme reluctance to speak up in class.

Writing from personal experience gained from 13 years of teaching at ITM, the researcher feels that many of these students from the rural areas or from small towns are not only ill-equipped to carry on their studies in English, they also have to make several adjustments, the need for some of which they may be unaware of. It appears that they need to be acculturated into an academic culture which is based more on Socratic notions of thinking than on the Asian notion of guru-follower which is based on love and affection. Some students look upon lecturers as elder sisters or brothers or even as mothers because of the implicit faith they have that figures of authority are also their guardians. They may be slow to realise that the attitude of the lecturer may be one of indifference rather than solicitude. Lecturers respond to requests for help but do not actively seek out students who need help.

Furthermore, as many of the students come from the villages, it is assumed that they would be entrenched in Malay culture, a basic tenet of which is respect for one's elders and unquestioning faith in anyone or anything which they perceive to be the authority, whether it is the lecturer or the printed word. This runs counter

to the culture of academia which encourages one to question and to determine for oneself, on the basis of logic, experience or intuition, what one wants to believe or accept.

The students, as with any student moving on from school to college, have to make another kind of adjustment, that is, from being dependent on parents to look after their needs, to being independent. Previously, teachers or tuition teachers seemed to bear the greater responsibility for the academic success of the students whereas in college, students are left largely on their own.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

It is precisely because of this contrast in their home background and life on campus, cultural experiences at home and on campus that it was felt necessary to find out how students cope with their problems in understanding their textbooks and lectures and, in particular, whether they are able to help themselves.

In the School of Accountancy where this study was done, students do not go through an intensive English course to prepare them for studies in college. Based on a placement test, the majority of students are usually placed in either Foundation One or Two. Even if they are in Foundation One, they would be required to read advanced level texts and reference books, magazines and journals in English.

It is very likely that the weak students who obtained the minimum requirement of five credits in the SPM will have difficulty following the lectures and in understanding their textbooks. This being the case, it was thought that it would be instructive to find out how they cope, in particular, how they handle their difficulties in comprehension when they come across something they do not understand while reading a text or while listening to a lecture.

It is the experience of the researcher that students rarely come forward with questions, even after class. They rarely make appointments with lecturers to discuss something that they have not understood. Lecturers say, when students do come to see them, it is usually near the examinations when they panic and then too, they do not have specific questions other than to ask for an explanation of "the whole thing".

Lecturers at ITM often say that most of the time students do not have questions to ask even when they do not understand. If students do not ask questions in class there are several possible reasons that one can envisage: they may not have read the text; they may not have been paying attention; they may think the lecturer has no time for questions; they could have been waiting for the right time to ask but the lecturer went on to something else; they may be afraid to ask in case the lecturer were to ask follow-up questions to seek clarification before answering the question - they feel they may be at a loss for words because they are not proficient in the language; they may be afraid of losing face; they may feel that others know

the answer and would regard the question as a silly question; they may feel that if they read it at home they may understand it better; they may think that the lecturer would not welcome questions, they may prefer to ask after class or they may be just not interested enough in their studies to seek a complete understanding.

The primary focus of this study is not whether students ask questions but whether they had a question to ask. That the subjects in this study do not speak up in class is a known factor. In fact, it is part of the criteria used to select the subjects for the study. The study seeks to investigate students' metacognitive activity of monitoring their own comprehension, their ability to detect the points where comprehension has failed and their ability to formulate a question about their lack of clarity. Metacognition refers to the knowledge and control people have over their own thinking and learning activities (Flavell, 1979 in Wilen & Phillips, 1995). Metacognitive activities involved in reading are being aware of one's own comprehension, knowing when comprehension has failed, and being able to use questioning strategies to clarify understanding. (Baker & Brown, 1984). The construction of a question, is viewed as part of a self-help strategy that students can use to aid comprehension. They may try to answer the question themselves by rereading, or they may take it to their friends or to the lecturers.

Educators such as Bernstein, 1973; Dansereau, et al., 1974; Frase & Swartz, 1975 (in Andre & Anderson, 1978) and Smith, (1972) stressed that students should be encouraged to ask their own questions in order to develop as independent readers.

Andre and Anderson (1978) tried to determine whether or not generating good comprehension questions while studying prose material was an effective study technique. They found, on doing a multiple regression analysis that the percentage of good comprehension questions was a significant predictor of achievement for students trained in questioning techniques and untrained students.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Lecturers usually pause from time to time or at the end of a lecture to ask if students have any questions. Writing from experience, the writer, placed in a similar situation, sometimes leaves the class with the uneasy feeling that although students do not ask questions, they may not have understood. If they do not have any questions, does it mean that they have understood everything? Many students are apprehensive about asking questions in class. Do they then, ask the lecturer or a friend after class or outside of class? If not, how do they resolve their problems in understanding? Lecturers generally welcome questions. But students do not seem to have questions to ask. This study will attempt to find out whether students, when they do not understand and do not ask, in fact had a question to ask but for some reason did not.

1.4 The Research Questions

1. Do the subjects understand a) most of what they read in English in their economics class? b) most of their lectures in economics?

2. If they do not understand, do they have questions to ask?
3. If they do not understand their texts or their lectures, do they consult their lecturers?
4. If they do not understand their texts or their lectures, how do they resolve their difficulties?

As the research questions deal to a large extent with the problem of whether students understand much of what they read, it is necessary to define what is meant by "reading" and "understanding". There are several definitions of reading but Frank Smith's (1978) is probably the most adequate:

Reading is asking questions of the printed text. And reading with comprehension becomes a matter of getting your questions answered. ...The questions readers ask depend precisely on the purpose of their reading in the first place. ...One of the most important skills of reading ... is knowing the right kinds of questions to ask for different kinds of text. To read we must ask questions, implicit questions, not ones that we are aware of, just as we must ask implicit questions to comprehend spoken language. But the questions readers ask must vary with the material they are reading, which is why prior knowledge is so important. If we do not know the right kinds of questions to ask of a maths text or knitting pattern, then obviously we will not be able to read a maths text or knitting pattern. And if we present children learning to read

with material they cannot possibly ask questions of - because they find it boring, beyond their understanding or simply because it is unequivocal nonsense in any case - then we should not be surprised if they cannot read. (p.107)

These two closely related skills that we perform without awareness or even appreciation of how we do it - asking appropriate questions and finding relevant answers - lie at the core of reading. We read to find answers to implicit questions. It is only when we reflect upon what we have read or when, upon reflection, we find that there is something that does not make sense, that we become conscious of questions that have been left unanswered. Then we re-read looking actively for the answers to the questions that we have in our minds and we find them or we do not.

It is possible to read and not understand any of what one has read. It is also possible to read, understand everything one had read and still not get the whole picture. At what point then can one say that one has understood? When we read, for example, a newspaper article on privatisation of universities, we understand everything in the article but we may not get the whole picture. We realise that we have not got the whole picture when we have questions that are not answered in the article. Hence, it is possible to understand the text and not understand everything about the topic. Reading then, is an activity that is limited to the words

on the page but understanding extends beyond the text.

When we read about something in which we have no particular interest we may understand the words but we may not seek a complete understanding of the subject because we are not interested in the subject. If we were, we would seek a more complete understanding of the subject. And the way we would do that is by asking questions. These questions will bridge the gap between what we know and what we do not. In reading newspapers of course we can dispense with this "understanding" of what we read. But in studying, we cannot dispense with it.

In this report, the word understanding is used in the same sense as comprehension which Lunzer and Gardner (1979) describe as:

...an achievement, like winning a race. It is not itself a process, but it does imply a process or activity that is more than just reading in a narrow sense of reorganising the words and 'following the sense'. There may be a point in time when comprehension is complete (or as complete as it will be) just as there is an instant when the athlete breaks the tape at the end of a race. But there is a difference. The athlete does only one thing. He runs and his achievement is measured by how fast he runs. But the reader who finally comprehends does two things - he reads and he thinks.

Hence comprehension is best defined as a measure of the pupil's ability and willingness to reflect on whatever it is he is reading. (Gardner in Lunzer & Gardner, 1979).

1.5 The Significance of the Study

In the age of information explosion, a question can be used to steer one's way through the deluge. It is the only way to prise open information from elusive politicians. Technicians and doctors use it in problem-solving. In the context of technology transfer from a reluctant partner, a question opens doors. The researcher, the scientist thrives on the question he wants answered.

In reading, questioning is indispensable. Usually the good reader goes straight to the answers to questions such as "What is this passage about?" "Is the author arguing for or against capital punishment?" It is only when comprehension fails that the questions come to the fore and the good reader becomes aware that he has a question and searches actively for the answer.

Poor readers are less aware of their own thought processes (Fitzgerald 1983). In the words of ²Dillon (1988, p.105):

... the question formulates the student's experience of perplexity, it gives motive and form to inquiry while providing those affective, cognitive and behavioral propensities that dispose the student not only to seek out the answer but also to receive and accommodate

it. From the pedagogical point of view, a student's question presents the perfect opening for teaching to enter, and also exhibits for pedagogical assessment and action the student's present complex of understanding. Moreover, the act of questioning itself signals that attention has already been engaged and thought already stimulated; expression has been given, motivation is in force, inquiry is joined and learning sought.

A question signifies understanding both by the presence and the lack of it. It is hoped that this study will help the lecturer to understand the silence when he pauses at the end of the lecture to ask "Any questions?"