

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a descriptive research design. It seeks answers to a few questions which were formulated on the basis of the researcher's intuition and readings, and on what is often bandied about as "common knowledge" by lecturers of ITM. The process of investigation was recursive in the sense that the researcher felt the need to return to the research questions to refine them and to the sources of data, to look for other sources of data to verify some of the findings. At the core of the design is a series of interviews seeking students' perceptions about their own ability to understand their textbooks and lectures and about their ability to formulate questions about their lack of clarity wherever it arises. Based on these interviews, common themes were identified. To triangulate the data, other sources of data were sought to determine whether data from these sources supported, discredited or shed more light on the data obtained from student interviews.

3.1 Sources of Data

The data was collected from:

- 1) Interviews with four students in a microeconomics class. These interviews were tape-recorded. These students were not proficient in English and sometimes had difficulty understanding the question and in expressing their ideas.

For this reason, the interviewee and interviewer frequently resorted to the use of Bahasa Malaysia. During the interviews with students, a set of prepared questions were followed. However, there were occasions when additional questions were asked in one interview to pursue points of interest which may have no parallel in the other interviews. The purpose of the interviews with students was to find out about their socio-economic background, their academic background, their problems with academic work in college, in particular whether they are able to understand their textbooks and lectures, how they cope with the academic problems they have and their expectations of the lecturer.

2) Interviews were conducted with two economics lecturers, (one of whom was the lecturer who taught the students interviewed in the study), to find out their views about the students abilities and shortcomings and about their own beliefs that underlie what they do in class. One of these lecturers was a Malay and the other a non-Malay . It happened that while the writer was interviewing the non-Malay lecturer, the Malay lecturer who shared a room with her was also present. She participated actively in the interview and freely gave her views which have been included in this study for the perspective it gave especially to the subject of the interaction between student and lecturer. Both lecturers have had long experience teaching economics in ITM. One had been working for 15 years and the other for 17 years. Hence they were familiar with the problems these students face in their work.

3) Observation of a microeconomics class and a tutorial by the same lecturer.

The aim was to observe student activity in class, the way the lecture was presented as well as the lecturer's support of questioning.

4) Students' economics textbooks were also examined for evidence of their having read them. A sample of the text was taken from their microeconomics text book and compared with text taken from the language courses that they are required to attend alongside their content area courses. The results of the four subjects in their economics examination were also traced.

5) The researcher herself has had 13 years' experience with students at ITM and has taught students at ITM's College of Preparatory Studies where the more promising Malay students taken largely from residential schools from various parts of the country are tutored in twinning programs for degrees conferred by universities abroad, as well as at the mainstream ITM campus where students with lower qualifications are accepted to pursue diploma courses. Hence the researcher is familiar with ITM students of various ability and proficiency levels.

3.2 Triangulation

One of the problems of using interviews as a research tool is a tendency for the interviewer to seek answers to support his preconceived notions (Cohen & Manion, 1989). The attempt to achieve greater validity was made by triangulating

data obtained from interviews with students with data from interviews with lecturers, from observation of classes and perusal of the students' economics text books as well as of texts used in the language classroom. Furthermore, when a comparison was made between the text used in the economics class and the text used in the language class, another language lecturer was asked for her opinion on the difficulties that she felt the students would encounter with the selected economics text.

3.3 Procedures for analysis

The interviews with students were tape-recorded and transcribed. The lecture and tutorial were also observed and excerpts were transcribed. The writer looked for common themes in the interviews with students. This was done before the interviews with the lecturers so that it was possible to discuss the same themes with the lecturers. In this way, data obtained from the student interviews was triangulated with data obtained from the lecturers.

3.4 Choice of subjects

The subjects of this study are college level students of Institute Teknologi Mara in Shah Alam. They are in the second semester of their first year in the Diploma in Accountancy (DIA) programme in the School of Accountancy. They have passed their Form Five Examination (SPM) and gained at least 5 credits two of which

are in English and Maths. Some of them might have done short courses in computer applications or in English; some might have worked before deciding to enter ITM. All of them are of Malay origin and are from government schools where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia. Courses in the DIA programme are mostly in English.

The second semester students were chosen as this would mean that the students would have had some time to settle in to life on the campus. As these students would have moved from the first to the second semester in the same group, they would also have had time to get to know each other and presumably feel more relaxed in class. The data was collected near the end of the semester so that the lecturer would be better able, on the basis of students' performance in class, to select the students for this study.

3.5 Criteria for selection of subjects

Four students were selected for the study on the basis of their performance in class tests and their participation in an economics class. The economics lecturer was requested by the writer to select four students who were weak in economics and who at the same time do not speak up in class and do not seek the help of the lecturer after class.

It is the weak students who, one expects, would have great difficulty understanding the textbooks and the lectures and who would therefore use the

question-asking strategy to resolve their difficulties in understanding. The lecturer chose the students on the basis of their performance in class assignments, their reluctance to speak up in class, their reluctance to meet with the lecturer outside of class to discuss difficulties in understanding the texts or the lectures and her intuitive judgement about their abilities.

3.6 Rationale for choice of content area class for the study

An economics class was observed. A content area class was chosen rather than a language class because a language class usually focuses on skills that are needed for academic work. For instance if it is a reading class, instruction would include or should include the cultivation of such skills as arriving at the main idea, determining how it is supported, working out the structure of a passage, making inferences, drawing on existing schema in the student's minds and relating it to ideas in the passage. The focus is on the skills that students use to arrive at meaning. Hence, since there is that scaffolding, there may be less opportunities or need for students to ask questions to clarify meaning.

In a content area classroom on the other hand, the lecturer usually focusses on the content and covers large tracts of it in a short span of time. He assumes that students know how to read or to listen for main ideas, determine what they understand and what they do not, formulate a question about their ambiguity and ask.

In content area classrooms therefore, there should be more opportunities or a greater need for students to ask questions of the lecturers. What happens there or does not happen there can have implications for the language classroom. The language classroom in this context is viewed as a place where students can be socialised into the academic world and may acquire strategies for learning and for communication. This is especially important in the second language context because students crossing the bridge from school to college have also to cross the language barrier . Furthermore, as these are Malay students mostly from rural areas, it is likely that they have yet another adjustment to make that is cultural in nature.

3.7 Profile of the students interviewed

All the students interviewed had either a Grade 2 or 3 in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and low credits for their English in the Form Five Examination (SPM). This Examination is based on the communication syllabus which is somewhat lax in terms of lack of insistence on correctness in favour of getting the message across. All of these students come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Bani

Bani is aged 19. She had a Grade 3 in her SPM, and an aggregate of 22. Her English score in the SPM was C6. Her mother does not work and her father is a wireless operator at the Fisheries Department in Kuantan earning about \$800.

She speaks Bahasa Malaysia at home and reads only the Bahasa Malaysia papers. She comes from a residential school. She is soft-spoken, has a child-like face; she giggles often and smiles a lot. She did not take up any course while waiting for her SPM results but worked for a while in a retail shop and liked working, which is why she was unhappy about coming to ITM to study and about having to study again. But her family and friends told her it would be good for her to continue her studies and that is why she accepted the offer. Studying in ITM means to her studying in English – that is the main difference to her about studying in ITM and studying in school where everything was in Bahasa Malaysia. She says she has problems in reading and listening in English and often feels sleepy in class. She does not look for main ideas when reading text books or when listening to lectures though she remembers being taught it in school but “tengah faham” (it was half understood), she said. There was never a time when she felt free to ask questions. At home she does not talk much with her father. She said she feels a little scared of him. He makes the decisions in the house and if he denies her permission to do something, she accepts his decision and does not try to negotiate. She feels that her course mates know more than her. If she does not understand something, she feels that it is her fault, that she does not have the power to understand, never the lecturer’s. She does not think that the lecturer may have failed to explain something well. She never looks at lecture notes until near the examinations. Nonetheless, she scored an A- in her economics class.

Syaril

Syaril is aged 19. He had a Grade 2 in his SPM , an aggregate of 28 and a C6 for SPM English. Syaril is generally very silent in class. He is well-mannered and obliging. At the time of the interview, he was running a temperature and yet he turned up. He comes from a family of four. His father is a watchman in a school earning about \$500-\$600 a month. His mother is a housewife. He has three siblings, one of whom has passed out of ITM with a Diploma in Engineering. He comes from Trengganu and has, apart from Selangor, been to Malacca and Johor with his family. He reads the newspapers but it is mostly the Bahasa Malaysia papers mainly for sports and entertainment news. He reads comics. His main problem with lectures, he says, is the language. He says he understands only about 20 percent of the lectures and reads his text books or lecture notes for a better understanding. He has a fairly close relationship with his parents. He generally accepts their decisions but feels he can talk to his parents about the decisions they make.

Ari Aslinda

Ari Alinda is 20. She had a Grade 2 in the Form Five Examination with an aggregate of 28 and a score of C4 for English. She is soft-spoken, smiles all the time and has some confidence in herself. She did a pre-diploma course in a branch campus before entering ITM. She did not apply to any other institution. Her main fear about coming to ITM was that she had heard that social life in ITM was very

liberal (“terlalu bebas”). She feels that studying in school was better than studying in ITM because in school the teacher explained everything in detail “cara terperinci”). Students got to see the teacher everyday and there was tuition after school which was very helpful. At ITM she had to be independent. If she has a problem in economics she does not seek the economics lecturer. But she does sometimes see her accounts lecturer whom she feels is very caring when she has problems in that subject. Ari Aslinda's mother is a supervisor in a factory and her father works as a radio operator for Carigali, Petronas. She comes from Kuala Terengganu and went to a non-residential school. One sister is doing a diploma course in Business Studies in ITM Dungun, one has just completed form 3 and the youngest is in Form 2. All family members speak mostly Bahasa Malaysia at home although they do sometimes read English newspapers and magazines.

Harizan

Harizan is 20 and obtained a grade two in her SPM exam with an aggregate of 29 and a score of C6 for English. She did a computer course for three months before coming to ITM. She felt happy about coming to ITM and she wants to further her studies by going on to a degree in accounting. At the ITM branch in Jengka where she comes from, accountancy is not offered. She says her father earns about \$450 as a Felda settler. Her mother died three years ago. Her relationship with her father, she says, is good although she is a little afraid of him. She feels that he is the authority and that he knows what is best for her. She stays at home

most of the time and does the housework. If she does go out, it is with her father or her brother who is currently in Form One. She says she does not often talk about current affairs with her father. In fact, she does not often chat with her father. Her family buys only the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers and they do all their reading in Bahasa Malaysia.