

## Chapter Four

### ANALYSES AND RESULTS

The data from the interviews with students and lecturers were transcribed. The writer then 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 interviews with lecturers, inspection of students' textbooks, as well as with field notes that were taken during the observation of a lecture.

The research questions it may be recalled, are as follows:

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?

The study found that the subjects are unable to understand a great part of their lectures and textbooks, that they are often unable to formulate a question to ask when they are confused because they often do not know what they are confused about. Their questions are really not questions but requests for a repeat of the explanation or for an explanation of large tracts of the text. Furthermore, they prefer to ask their friends for help rather than the lecturer and if, friends are unable to help, they memorise facts that they can reproduce in the examinations. The data presented in this chapter will show that they can get by with doing this owing to the examination-orientation of the lectures and the format of the examinations.

In examining the data, the following themes were identified:

- a) The subjects' inability to understand their texts and lectures
- b) The subjects' aversion for "reading subjects"
- c) The perpetuation of the lecture-recitation method of instruction
- d) The subjects' inability to formulate specific questions
- e) The subjects' unwillingness to enter into a dialogue with lecturers

#### **4.1 The subjects' inability to understand their texts and lectures**

The following excerpts from interviews with the students indicate that the subjects were generally unable to understand large tracts of their text books and lectures.

(The original versions of the excerpts, if they were originally in Bahasa Malaysia, appear in the appendix.)

### **Excerpt 1**

#### **Syaril**

Q: Are you able to understand the lectures?

A: I don't understand much. Sometimes I understand only 20 percent of it. I read books later to understand. I just copy what the lecturer writes on the board.

Q: Are you able to understand what you read of your text books?

A: Reading - I understand more. Can see a bit more. I sometimes study with friends. Can ask friends if I don't understand something. The language is a problem for me. Sometimes, at a higher level, if there is a word that I cannot understand, it disturbs everything.

Q: Are you able to detect the main ideas of what you read?

A: ...mmm..

Q: When you read can you work out the main idea of paragraphs and whole sections? ..... You know, can you get at what the writer is saying? Are you able to separate the more general ideas from the details?

A: .... mmm ... Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

#### **Bani:**

Q: Do you understand the textbooks in economics?

A: I understand some parts but some parts I find very difficult. All the subjects are in English. I find very difficult.

Q: Do you understand the lectures?

A: I have problem listening and reading. Everything in English.

Q: Do you look for the outline of the lecture if the lecturer does not give it to you in the beginning?

A: No. I feel very sleepy.

Q: Then it makes no difference whether you come for the lecture or not because you feel sleepy, you don't pay attention.

A: But I like to go to school.

### **Ari Aslinda**

Q: Do you understand the lectures in economics?

A: Both reading the text books and listening to lectures are a problem. The lecturer sometimes talks too fast and I can't get the meaning. Sometimes I can't get what she means and I must refer to the books and the books are also very long. A bit difficult.

Q: When you read, are you able to get the main ideas.

A: ... ummm ... (looks blank)

Q: You know, can you find out what paragraphs or whole sections are about? Can you get at what the author is trying to say?

A: ....ummm... sometimes, yes.

### **Harizan**

Q: Do you understand the lectures in microeconomics?

A: Sometimes can. Sometimes she talks very fast, I cannot pick up. Sometimes we just don't know what to take, what to write down. That's why sometimes we mark in the text book what we don't understand. Then we read the book. If we still don't understand we ask friends.

Q: Are you able to get at the main ideas when you read your text book?

A: ... main idea....

Q: You know the "isi penteng" (main ideas). Can you say in a few words what a paragraph or a whole section is about? Can you follow the argument of the author?

A: Maybe sometimes, yes and sometimes no.

It is evident from the above statements that the students did have difficulty understanding their textbooks though this seemed to be less of a problem than listening to lectures. The fact that lectures and textbooks are in English, whereas



the students are accustomed to instruction in Bahasa Malaysia, the medium of instruction in schools, is a major problem. The students were unable to get at the main ideas of texts. Harizan said she remembered having learnt about main idea in both their English and Bahasa Malaysia classes in school but it was only half understood (“tengah faham”). All of the subjects did have problems distinguishing the main idea and said that it was only sometimes that they could get at it and sometimes not.

This could be because they did not recognize the cues that authors use to signal an important idea. They might not have enough background knowledge of the subject to make reasonable judgements that would help them to distinguish main ideas from the details. Schmidt et al (1989) have a plausible explanation for problems readers in a second language have, which could apply in this case : “If students are having difficulty locating important ideas in a high school textbook, it is probably not because they don’t know, in theory, how to look for a main idea. The problem is that the text has become more complex, and they don’t recognize the important ideas.”(p.432).

Baker and Brown (1984) caution against excessive reliance on interview data and advise seeking convergent behavioral evidence because studies incorporating both interview and behavioral components have often revealed a lack of

correspondence between what the reader says and does. In the light of this observation the writer examined the subjects' textbooks to look for evidence of annotations or highlighting which would indicate that students had been trying to discern main ideas, and also talked to two economics lecturers to see if they were aware of the problem that students had with reading.

It was found that the subjects highlighted their reading material excessively, underlining even the details and not just the main ideas. There were also large tracts of the book that were clean. Questioned about this they said those were the more difficult parts and they relied on lecturer's notes or the notes of their seniors for those sections.

The lecturers too seemed to be aware of students' difficulties in reading. (In the interviews with lecturers the reference was to ITM students in general, not only to the subjects.) The lecturers corroborated the subjects' own perceptions about their reading performance. When asked whether students had a problem reading their text books, the two economics lecturers interviewed affirmed that students had a problem reading.

## **Excerpt 2**

### **Economics lecturer**

"They cannot read and get it ... We tell them to read before coming to class. They do. Some of them try very hard. But they can't get it. Their reading skills are very poor".

The lecturers said some students do get bogged down at the word or sentence level and struggle with getting the overall meanings of what they read. All the four subjects interviewed said they had problems with lexical density and complex sentences. While their command of vocabulary was poor, the students were also being introduced to economic terminology. The following is an excerpt from their textbook which is typical of the kinds of texts they were required to read in their economics course.

### **Excerpt 3**

Non pecuniary benefits are also associated with location. This explains the regional wage differentials that arise from such positively valued amenities as climate, recreational activities and city size. Employers locating in the warm Sunbelt areas can attract labor services at lower wages. If money wages were equal in all areas, migration would continue to the Sunbelt area until money wages fell.

Studies confirm that wages for the same job and level of skills are higher in larger cities than in smaller cities. These results hold even after careful adjustment for differences in the cost of living associated with city size. The cause of city size differential hasn't been completely explained. A likely reason is that smaller cities offer a better quality of life. The differential could reflect less congestion, less pollution and less exposure to crime in smaller cities.

Compensating wage differentials are more pronounced when all individuals have the same tastes. If some individuals enjoy exposing themselves to hazards and others dislike what would commonly be regarded as amenities, the differentials would be correspondingly less.

(Source: Campbell R. McConnell & Stanley L. Brue (1993) Economics: Principles, Problems and Policies, 12th ed., McGraw Hill Inc., New York)

From the experience of the writer as a language teacher for these students and from the experience of another English language lecturer who was asked for her opinion, these students would definitely have difficulty with the vocabulary of this passage. Although the sentences are short except for the last one, the passage is lexically dense. Even words such as 'hold' and 'likely' may pose problems because students may think they know what they mean as these are common words when in fact it is the less common meanings that are invoked in those sentences. 'Hold' for example, does not mean 'to support'. It means 'not true or valid'. 'Likely' has nothing to do with 'like' but with 'probability'. But students are likely to think they know the meaning and end up getting confused.

By contrast, the texts used in their English language class are far less complicated in terms of lexical density and sentence structure. In fact the texts are usually doctored by the language lecturers to simplify them. All the four subjects in the study and in fact the majority of students who enter this programme begin with Foundation English I which they do in one semester, on completion of which they go on to Foundation English II. At the time that this study was done, the subjects were in their second semester and were in Foundation English II. The following is an excerpt of a typical text taken from their Foundation English II course:

Malacca's Butterfly Park and Museum, located near the Ayer Keroh toll plaza, is undergoing a complete change. Once work is completed, it will not only be a tourist attraction but a centre for nature education as well.

The park will have among other things, a modern laboratory which will be the first of its kind in Asia and second in the world. Here, visitors will be able to take a close look at the wonders of \*metamorphosis. When the laboratory is completed, it will breed more butterfly species. Up to now, the 50 species kept at the park multiply naturally and according to the seasons. With the newly established laboratory, the park will not need to depend on nature completely as eggs from foreign countries can be brought in to be hatched.

The present design of the park, including its white coloured netting, contributes to excessive heat. This unfortunately, has killed many of the butterflies. Park workers are now installing dark-coloured nets to cut out direct sun rays and are rearranging their positions to prevent the insects from getting trapped in the corners.

\*metamorphosis: a complete change of form

(Source: FEII Final Examination, Reading Comprehension text, 1996, Pusat Bahasa, ITM)

The comparison of the texts taken from the subjects' content-area textbook and from their language course shows a wide disparity between the authentic text which is loaded in terms of lexical density and complex sentences and the texts used in the language class have been simplified by the lecturers to suit the proficiency level of the students. The students were clearly not equipped to handle the kinds of texts they were required to read. This could, in part, explain their aversion for what they called "reading subjects" which refers to subjects which require a great deal of reading of continuous prose as opposed to "calculation subjects" which deal more with formulae and figures.

## 4.2 The subjects' aversion for 'reading subjects'

In response to a question about being able to understand concepts in economics, all four students expressed an aversion for “reading subjects” be it in English or Bahasa Malaysia and a preference for what they called 'calculation subjects. '

### Excerpt 4

#### Syaril

I feel in economics it is hard to score. A subject like accounting, easy to score. But economics, difficult. Economics, lot to read. Cannot read. But accounting, statistics, lots of exercises, easy, lots of calculation. I am not interested in a subject like this. When I was in part one, management subject, lots to read, not interested either.

Q: You don't like to read books?

A: Don't like to take on a subject that involves a lot of memorising.

Q: Whether in BM or BI?

A: Yes

Q: So you prefer calculation subjects?

A: Because I forget. I cannot remember. Memorise, then I forget, Even in school, history, geography, don't remember the facts either.

#### Bani

Q: Do you like economics?

A: No. I never like reading subjects. ....difficult. In school also the same. I just don't like to read and memorise all the facts.

#### Ari Aslinda

Q: Are you more interested in accounting than in economics?

A: Yes, because I am more interested in subjects that involve calculation. Economics – lot of memorisation work. Sometimes I just don't like to have to study by rote. I don't like very much to

read. When I was in school too I was not very interested in subjects that involved a lot of memorisation – history, geography.

### **Harizan**

For sure, I don't like subjects that involve a lot of reading and memorising, ... Boring. Even before I felt the same way.

The subjects seemed to associate 'reading subjects' with memory work. Since examinations in school are geared to testing ability of students to reproduce factual information, students do a lot of rote learning. In fact, one of the subjects, Ari Aslinda, said that when she was in Form Three in school she did not buy the geography textbook, initially because it was out of stock and then because she found it more useful to study from a revision guide. Yet she passed with credit in her Form Three Examination. The aversion that the subjects had for 'reading subjects' may be due to the fact that they associated 'reading subjects' with rote-learning because of the way these subjects were tested in school. The system is perpetuated at college level as the data presented later on in this chapter will show.

Another reason for their aversion to 'reading subjects' could be that they did not like reading or were not used to reading or found it hard to read. Syaril said (underlined in Excerpt 4 above) he did not like economics because "...there is a lot to read. Cannot read."; Bani said, "I just don't like to read..."; Ari Aslinda said "I don't like very much to read." and Harizan said, "I don't like subjects that involve a lot of reading..."

Devine (1988) found that low proficiency students do not read fast and instead spend a lot of time trying to process difficult syntax and are even unable to process syntactic cues critical to text comprehension. Poor readers spend too much time thinking about the words rather than automatically recognising them (Eskey, 1988).

Clarke (1988) suggests that there is a threshold level of linguistic competence necessary for successful L2 reading. He suggests that students who have developed strong top-down skills in their native languages may not be able to transfer these higher-level skills to a second language context until they have developed a stronger bottom-up foundation of basic identification skills. Limited control over the language “short circuits” the good reader’s system causing him or her to revert to poor reader strategies when presented with a difficult or confusing task in the second language.

In the light of this theory, one might say that the subjects did not like and found it hard to read in English because they had not reached the threshold level of competence in English. If one accepts this theory one might suppose that these students were competent readers in their L1 which is Bahasa Malaysia, but were unable to transfer their reading skills to their L2 because they had not reached the threshold proficiency level in L2.



But there is another possibility and one that this study suggests may be worth studying further, which is that they were not competent readers in either language. The argument is that students do not read in their L1 as there is no need for them to read since they can rely on the revision guides. Therefore they may not know how to read to learn. If these reading skills are absent in their L1, they will not be able to transfer them to their L2.

That all four subjects said they disliked reading and 'reading subjects' and associated those subjects with rote-learning suggests that the root of the reading problem lies in school. It is relevant to recall at this point, Ari Aslinda's testimony that she never bought her Form Three geography text book, studied solely from revision guides and yet passed. It is a well-known fact that students in Malaysian government schools study from quick-revision books which list important facts in point form. Furthermore, until recently, all secondary school public examinations were entirely in the multiple-choice format and tested recall of information more than analysis, evaluation or discussion. Although the examinations have now been changed to include subjective answers in Form Five and project work in Form Three, making it necessary for students to look for information from general sources other than their textbooks, to read on their own, to evaluate and analyse, it is pertinent to find out whether and how reading skills are taught in schools. It would still be possible for students to learn up model subjective answers from revision guides. Students may also be given the requirements for their project

work and left on their own to find the information they need without proper guidance on doing reference work.

The notion that students do not read is supported by Pandian (1993) who in doing a survey of university students in Malaysia made the alarming finding that 80 percent of students of all races were "reluctant" readers of English language materials while 77 percent were reluctant readers of Malay-language material. What he terms as "reading reluctance" is the phenomenon of students who can read but who choose not to read for information or for pleasure. He defined a 'reluctant reader' as one who has the ability to read but who chooses not to. In a more recent survey of 304 Malay Form Four students in Malaysia Pandian (1996) found that 84 percent of Malay students were reluctant readers of English-language material and 78 percent of the students were reluctant readers of Bahasa Malaysia materials. A reluctant reader in English, his findings suggest, was likely to be a reluctant reader in Bahasa Malaysia as well.

In fact, in one study of 38 students of the School of Library Science of ITM to investigate their problems in reading academic texts, Lee (1994), found that many students lacked study skills such as dictionary reference skills, doing library searches, note-taking and picking out main ideas. More than half felt that it was not necessary to read in English in order to pass examinations because the lecture notes were sufficient. In fact it was found that it was not necessary for them to do

any library searches as the necessary journal articles or sections from reference books were photocopied for them( Lee, 1994) by the lecturers or would have been passed on from seniors to freshmen.

The finding is that students avoid 'reading subjects' because they do not like to read. It is not possible on the basis of data collected in this study to conclude that students do not read and do not have the reading skills in their L1 and cannot therefore transfer them to their L2. But the findings suggest that it is certainly a subject that is worth studying.

#### **4.3 The perpetuation of lecture-recitation method of instruction**

That it is possible for students to pass even college examinations without having to read extensively, indeed without understanding, was made evident in the interviews with two of the subjects, Harizan and Bani, in the present study. They said they had had the experience of answering questions in exams without understanding what the question was all about. Both received an A- for the economics paper. They said they spotted questions and memorised answers to the more difficult questions, without understanding.

Certainly a great deal of time is spent going through past year examination papers in class. Economics is taught in two hours a week of which one is the lecture hour and the other the tutorial. The tutorial class is the same as the lecture in terms of

number of students. The same class attends both tutorial and lecture and the lecturer and tutor are the same person. What has happened is that the “tutorial” has metamorphosed into an examination preparation class. Students are broken up into groups and asked to prepare answers to past-year exam questions. According to the lecturer, this was what the students wanted and this was corroborated by all the four subjects in the study. Quoted below are the words of only one student but the view is shared by the other three.

**Harizan**

**Excerpt 5**

Q: Your tutorials usually look at past year questions. Do you like it that way? That they deal with past year questions? Or would you prefer that you have tutorials in small groups so that you can talk to the lecturer and ask her whatever questions you may have?

A: Using past year questions. I like that better.

In line with students’ expectations, the lecturer observed in the study herself affirmed that she adopted the recitation method as is evident in her responses to the following questions:

**Excerpt 6**

**Lecturer**

Q: What do you expect these students to be able to do in your class? Do you want them to reproduce what you give them, do you want them to discuss ideas or do you want them to relate what they learn to real life experiences?

A: Of course, the ideal is for them to do all three. But since they are new to economics, we don’t expect them to relate real life events to what they learn. That will come later, next semester when we go into the study of the Malaysian economy. Still, we do give them examples from the Malaysian economy to illustrate points we are making. But they can’t discuss these ideas because they don’t

read the papers. they don't know yesterday's headlines. ... Relating ideas from one's own experience and knowledge - I had that only once - two semesters ago - there was a good student, confident, he had travelled, been to Germany and all. He would speak and discuss ideas and try and tie up text book knowledge to real life events. He was very confident. But these students - we just want them to learn the theories and principles.

The following excerpts are part of field notes that were taken during an observation of a lecture. The observations were made towards the end of the term. As a result, the lecture might have been more examination-oriented than it might otherwise have been. They serve to show that the lectures require little participation from students, that they are geared to the auditory learner as most classrooms are (Hodges, 1982 in Reid, 1987, p.99) and that the lecturer expects the students to repeat after her. There is no discussion or heuristics. The lecturer's main concern is to get across certain ideas by getting students to recite those ideas.

### **Excerpt 7**

She wrote on the board the word 'Rent'. She was going to talk about the different types of rent. She asks: "What is rent in layman's terms?" She gets an oral response - "sewa". She says, "In economic terms, rent means more than that. She says that there are three types of rent. When introducing concepts, she dictates and gives examples. She talks about the first one. She writes "1. Transfer earnings" on the board. "Sometimes called opportunity costs" she says. She dictates the definition and then gives an example: "You expect \$900. If you are not paid \$900 you are not going to work. The difference is known as transfer earnings." She writes the next type of rent: "2. Economic rent" and dictates: "a surplus payment to any factor of production over and above that which the factor can earn in its next best alternative". She gave the example: "If you expect \$900 and you are given \$1500, will you work? Yes. So the extra payment you get is the economic rent." She drew a graph to explain it. Students copied everything down.

She asked if they followed. They said “no”. She asked “Which part?”. Then without waiting, she pointed to the board and said “Here, this one?” The students said “yes”. She explained again. She went step by step. Asked a question, waited six seconds, then, as there was no response, she answered it herself. She asked another question and said “Anybody wants to try?” She resorted to Bahasa Malaysia - they didn’t answer. She supplied the answer. She gave another example, this time, from the text book. She asked questions. She answered them herself. She gave another example to explain the same point. She asked questions and this time they answer. She goes on to the third point.

As the writer listened to the lecture, two questions crossed her mind: Why do you have these different types of rent? In what situations do they become relevant? The lecturer never asked the students if they had any questions. The students never asked any questions. She must have asked 30-40 questions. One did not hear the students speaking at length. Their answers were always one-word answers or short phrases. This could in part be because the lecturer anticipated their questions and answered them or she phrased questions in such a way that students needed to supply only one or two words in answer. What could have been happening is that the lecturer, acting on the lack of feedback from the students has adjusted her own input linguistically or contentwise so that students’ answers are carefully guided and kept to a word or a phrase. Questioned about this in the interview, the lecturer said the students hardly speak up in class, hence she had to make guesses, based on non-linguistic cues, at the problems in understanding that they might have.

The following excerpts show that the responses of the students were carefully guided by the lecturer. Students were not required to produce full sentences in which they would have to link up ideas. Students produced single word responses that filled in blanks that the lecturer left open at the end of sentences or they were asked to choose one of two responses. These responses were elicited by way of a pause at the end of a sentence and an upward intonation.

These excerpts come from field notes that were taken from a tutorial during which students presented answers to past-year examination questions.

#### **Excerpt 8**

"The amount of money supply depends on economic conditions. Now we want to control inflation. What should we do? --increase money supply or decrease money supply ? Students answer: "decrease money supply". "Increase interest rates or decrease interest rates?" the lecturer asks and the students say: " increase interest rates".

#### **Excerpt 9**

The lecturer says " $P < AC$ . So you are making a loss. But you will not shut down. Why?" She gives the answer at once - "because  $P$  is greater than  $AVC$ ". The students repeat the answer.

#### **Excerpt 10**

The lecturer, referring to a graph on the board, says " You only draw the  $AVC$  when there is a shut down point. If there is no shut down - don't draw it."Then she asks: "You only draw the  $AVC$  where there is a (intoning upwards) \_\_\_\_\_?" The students answer, "shutdown". You have to repeat it until you get it right. She gets the students to repeat her example until they can say it right.

The observation of this tutorial was made near the end of term, which could to some extent explain the exam-orientation of the tutorial. Students were presenting answers to past year questions and the lecturer was correcting them. There was very little interaction between lecturer and the students and the lecturer tended to ask her own questions and answer them herself.

Lack of language proficiency holds students back from participating actively in class and it is this that makes it such a struggle for the lecturer. Students' lack of proficiency, the imperative of the examination, students' expectations of exam-orientation in their lectures, the type of examination questions and possibly the unwillingness of the lecturer to diverge from trodden paths, makes the lecture recitation method the convenient one but this only kills the interest of the students even as it brings them results. All the four subjects passed their economics final examination, two of them, Harizan and Bani, scored an A-. By their own admission, they had reproduced model answers to some of the questions from memory. This raises the question of how much of their education was meaningful. "Meaningful learning [is an active and constructive process which] occurs when readers generate new understandings based on the relationship between prior knowledge stored in memory (schema) and new information presented in text." (Moorman and Blanton, 1990, p.176). Unfortunately, it seems that for the students involved in this study, the grade seems to have become more important than the learning itself.



Considering the fact that students have problems understanding the texts, and considering the fact that students generally do not ask questions, one wonders whether they have questions to ask. The excerpts cited below show that the subjects were usually unable to narrow down the area of the text that they found problematic.

#### **4.4 The subjects' inability to formulate specific questions**

This section deals with the subjects' use of intervention strategies in reading. Metacognition refers to the knowledge and control people have over their thinking and learning activities (Flavel, 1979, in Wilen & Phillips, 1995):

Basically there are two components to the metacognitive process : awareness and action. Awareness of one's cognitive behaviour during a task includes awareness of the purpose of the assignment, awareness of what is known about the task, awareness of what needs to be known and awareness of the strategies and skills that facilitate or impede understanding (Wilen & Phillips, 1995, p. 135).

When a reader realises that he has not understood, he would go back and reread, and identify the particular area that he has not understood and formulate a question about it. "Self-questioning helps create an awareness of comprehension

and miscomprehension, that is, you have to be aware of what you know and don't know in order to form the questions."(Fitzgerald, 1983, p.253).

The subjects were usually unable to come up with specific questions in relation to something they had not understood. When pressed to come up with some types of questions that they may have, they invariably asked for meanings of words or they would point to whole sections of a text and say "I don't understand the whole thing".

#### **Excerpt 11**

Syaril

If I don't understand, I ask a friend.

Q: How do you ask?

A: I ask him to explain again what the lecturer said ... not everything aa... a little bit. Then I read the book to understand better.

Another question that was asked during the interviews with the subjects was: "If there is something that blocks your progress in reading, what is usually the case: a) you are confused, meaning that you do not understand but you cannot say what it is that you do not understand, or b) you do not understand, meaning that you know that you do not understand, and you know what it is that you do not know?"

All the subjects interviewed said that they were usually confused, that is, they were unable to say what it was that they did not understand. Hence they were often unable to formulate a question about what it was that they had not understood.

### **Excerpt 12**

**Syaril:**

Q: The times when you don't understand, are you usually confused? ...(pause) ...You know, when you don't understand something, is it usually because you don't know what it is you don't know or is it that you know what it is that you don't know?

A: I don't know what I do not understand.

Q: You don't know what it is that you don't understand. So you can't pinpoint or make a question about what it is that you don't know? You can't formulate a question about it.

A: Ya

Q: You can't make a question about what it is that you don't understand?

A: Sometimes I know what it is that I don't know.

Q: Sometimes you know but sometimes you don't know.

A: Yes. I want to ask but sometimes I don't know what to ask - it doesn't come, like I don't think ...to ask or whatever.

Q: Does this usually happen or sometimes?

A: Biasa.

All four subjects said they did get confused. All four of them said that when they did not understand, they were often unable to formulate a question about what it was that they did not understand.

The problem here may be two-fold: a) the subjects may not be actively monitoring their own comprehension since the metacognitive skill is not developed in poor readers (Baker & Brown, 1984) b) the texts that the subjects were required to read were basically inaccessible to them in terms of language. The subjects might have been operating primarily at the decoding level and were unable to see the relationship between ideas in the text. The comparison that was made earlier of the content-area text and a text used in their language classroom provides evidence of the difficulties the subjects must have encountered in reading content-area texts.

#### **4.5 Reluctance of subjects to engage in a dialogue with the lecturer**

When the subjects had a problem understanding a lecture or their text book, they usually wanted a repeat of the explanation, and they usually turned to their friends (“tanya member”) or seniors for help rather than the lecturers. None of the subjects in the study said they consulted their lecturers. The attitude of the subjects to the lecturers was a curious one. All the four subjects said they thought of a lecturer that they felt close to as like a parent or as an older brother or sister.

##### **Excerpt 13**

##### **Harizan**

Q: How do you feel about lecturers? do you think of them as like parents or like “kagak” or “abang” (*Trans: elder sister or brother*) or as just lecturers?

A: Lecturers “yang kita suka itu macam ayah atau kakak” (*Trans: The lecturers that we like, we regard as like father or elder sister*)

**Bani**

Q: You said "rapat". What does that mean, "rapat"?

A: Knows the name, we know her, she's familiar with us, teacher who asks us to do quality work. Teacher who cares about us, she wants us to do well.

Q: Lecturers at ITM, how are they?

A: There are some who are "rapat" like our accounts lecturer.

Q: What makes her "rapat"?

A: She is kind. If we don't know something she will explain it all until we understand. I don't ask my econs lecturer. My friends ask. She appears not to be very caring. She carries on as if we understand.

Q: Does Bani ...want lecturers...to look after all her study needs like parents looks after her needs at home ... look after all of Bani's needs?

A: No. Here it is time I looked after things myself if I don't want to be left behind. Look after everything myself.

Q: But you would prefer it if everything was looked after for you.

A: mm (laughs).

Bani said she realised that she had to be more independent. Yet she looked on lecturers (those she felt 'close' with) as parents or as elders and wishes that they could take care of things for her the way her parents used to. It appears that there is a dichotomy between what she knew and what she did or expected. She might be aware that she had to take care of her own needs yet she did not. Perhaps she did not know how to. It was Bani who in Excerpt I said she felt sleepy in class.

This suggests that she may be having problems , perhaps with time management or with coping with work.

Bani and Harizan expected a lecturer to be solicitous and concerned about their welfare - whether they came to class or not, whether they were able to cope with their work, whether they did their assignments well or whether they had personal problems. Their expectation that lecturers be solicitous of their welfare and care for them the way their parents do is at odds with the impersonality of college life. It seems that there is a need for them to be made aware of the fact that help will not be forthcoming if they do not seek it. The lecturers interviewed said if students needed help with their readings, they, the lecturers expected the students to be able to formulate a question about it and ask. Yet, this is precisely what the subjects are unable to do.

One of the two lecturers interviewed in this study who is herself a Malay, said during the interview:

#### **Excerpt 14**

##### **Lecturer**

"For these students, interpersonal relationship is very important. We must break through the classroom barriers. I take them out sometimes to the concourse near the mosque, give them food, talk to them, then they open up. They need to feel the love. They need to love before they will break the academic ice."

Certainly, for these students, being at the level of communicative competence that they presumably were at, it would be tremendously difficult for them to do speak to lecturers unless the lecturer exudes some warmth. Describing the immense struggle for the language learner, Kasper (1989, p.222) writes, "The great frequency of learners' self-initiated and self-completed repairs in classroom activities where they have to plan the content of their contributions themselves is indicative of the learners' production problems."

For a learner to acquire communicative competence, he or she has not only to have knowledge of linguistic rules but also about the nature and function of communicative acts. Learning to speak is not merely being able to construct sentences but involves also, notions of context and appropriacy. A student has to have the ability to use these underlying types of knowledge appropriately in reception and production in order to achieve communicative goals. (Kasper, 1989). One might expect that the process of acquisition of communicative competence in L2 for these subjects would be all the more difficult and slower because they have no opportunities to speak English to anyone outside the classroom the student population being all Malay. The writer has observed from her experience of teaching at ITM that the students face peer pressure to speak in Bahasa Malaysia and not in English.

The subjects, by their own admission, did not speak to lecturers whether in class or outside of class even when he or she was allowed to use Bahasa Malaysia. There could be several possible explanations for this. The social customs that the subjects were familiar with may be at odds with the norms or the rules in the academic domain. In college students are expected to speak up, to question and to seek out the lecturer if they need help. This may be at odds with a culture which, for instance, enjoins unquestioning faith in authority and unquestioning respect for one's elders. In some cultures, parents hold the belief that children are meant to be seen and not heard and they treat adolescents like they were children. But whether this is true of these students is a subject that needs further study.

Their low oral proficiency level was surely a factor inhibiting their speech. Oral speaking skills is after all one of the most difficult skills to acquire. This, coupled with the fact that their reading skills were also poor and they were often unable to say what it was that they were unclear about made it difficult for them to talk to the lecturer.

Another reason for their silence could be a fault in the situation. The learner could be unwilling to cooperate, or uninterested, or unsure as to what the lecturer expected of him and keeps silent at the very times when the teacher wants him to talk, whereas he probably uses a large amount of language in other situations that



are more familiar to him, such as when he is dealing with his family or friends (Hudson, 1980).

What could also be true is that not only did they not know how and what to say but that they were not used to talking about current issues or about ideas in a philosophical way with members of the family at home or with their friends or in school even in their native language.