

Chapter Five

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter will summarise first the main findings of the study and then go on to discuss the implications for teaching followed by directions for further research. The chapter ends with a section on the limitations of the study.

5.1 Summary of main findings

A finding of this study is that all four students were not able to understand large tracts of their lectures and textbooks. All of them had problems distinguishing the main idea from the supporting details. They were unable to detect the source of their difficulty in understanding and were therefore unable to formulate a question about it. Instead of asking questions they made requests to explain whole sections of the text. They wanted to hear it again or they wanted a paraphrase. The problem with that is that lecturers tend to get annoyed with requests of this nature unless it is made in class where all students can benefit from the repetition. It was probably because they were perceptive of this reception by lecturers that the subjects refrained from seeking help from the lecturer. Weak students are especially fearful of speaking up in class due to both linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

Lecturers usually ask at the end of a lesson “Any questions?” The findings indicate that with these students and with others like them, there would be no questions forthcoming even though there might be a great deal that was still not clear in their minds. Yet, lecturers would continue to invite questions. Questions serve as signposts demarcating the particular areas of uncertainty. They give the lecturer an entry point from which he or she may offer further clarification. They indicate that the student’s thought processes are engaged and that he has some control over his thought processes. A’s questions stimulate B’s thoughts but more importantly, as ²Dillon (1988) points out, A’s questions stimulate A’s thoughts.

It is useful then to find out for what reasons these students were unable to come up with specific questions that would help them out of their haziness. Why did they not have a question to ask?

Quoting studies done on children, Baker & Brown (1984) say readers may generate an internal signal that an obstacle to comprehension has been encountered but may not notice or interpret those signals or may not recognise their significance or may not know what to do about it. Although many of the studies they looked at were done on children, they feel the same applies to adults: “Anyone who has ever taught a group of college students must know that their metacognitive skills in a variety of domains could stand considerable enhancing!” (Baker & Brown, 1984, p.380).

A surprising finding of this study is that all the students interviewed said they did not like what they called 'reading subjects' referring to subjects such as economics, management, law and public administration because it involved too much memory work. They felt that they were better at subjects involving calculation, like accounting. They did not like to read whether in Bahasa or in English; they do not read (Lee, 1994; Pandian 1995) and one suspects they did not know how to read academic texts. This is one direction for further research indicated by this study: that over and above linguistic deficiency in their L2, weak students may be lacking in the skills they need to cope with academic texts.

What is even more alarming is that they had felt that same aversion to 'reading subjects' in school where the medium of instruction was Bahasa Malaysia. That secondary school students did not like to read whether in Bahasa Malaysia or in English, whether for information or for pleasure, is well-supported by Pandian (1995) in a survey involving 975 Malay students in Form Four in 15 schools. He found that about three quarters of the students did not like to read in English and about two thirds did not like to read in Bahasa Malaysia.

In a study involving 38 students to investigate, primarily through interviews and a questionnaire, the problems of ITM students in reading academic texts in English, Lee (1994) concluded that the students read largely at the decoding level. Their lack of proficiency, their deficiency in world knowledge and the fact of their being unpractised readers indicates that they lack the critical mass of knowledge that

students need in order to read the kinds of texts that they are required to read on the course.

Furthermore, lecturers, aware of the difficulty that students face in reading and understanding academic material, accommodate them by providing notes and handouts. Students are aware that reading is indeed crucial to good academic performance but they are also aware that it is possible to pass the examination without expending too much effort on reading the reference material. "In fact there was hardly any practice or effort in the system that may be construed as insistence on reading. Generally, the system provided an option where reading was concerned. The reading lists were there for those who would read, ... but for those who had not the inclination or the ability to access the information, the system provided a way out in the form of copious lecture notes...."(Lee, 1994)

The nature of the assessment perpetuates the lie – students seem to be able to pass and even answer questions that they have no understanding of. This is because the forms of assessment test the acquisition of content rather than the process of learning and thinking. Tutorials which should be the forum for discussion and clarification have become transformed into examination-preparation classes. It is possible for weak students who do not understand something, to learn up chunks, regurgitate it in the examination and pass.

5.2 Implications for teaching

Knowledge, rightly viewed, is “a distinctive construction by the learner, something that issues out of a rational use of mental processes” (Paul, 1985, p.38). One of the goals of education should be to assist students in learning information from text. To this end, lecturers should equip students with personal strategies for independent learning. Unfortunately, it appears that the grade has become more important than the learning itself.

But students who enter college lacking in adequate basic skills present severe problems for the lecturer. There is the danger that content lecturers, faced with students of low language ability, classify these students as of low ability and impart instruction that is based on a watered-down version of the curriculum, thus giving these students qualitatively different literacy experiences (Reyes & Molner, 1991). If the lack of English fluency is erroneously perceived as an indicator of low intellectual ability, it could result in minimal exposure to higher order thinking skills (DeAvila, Duncan & Navarrete, 1987 in Reyes and Molner, 1991).

The problem, one suspects, stems from the school. But changes in the school system take time to materialise. Furthermore, ITM admits students at lower qualifying levels than some universities because of its social engineering goals of providing opportunities for upward mobility to the less privileged strata of society. There is a need, therefore, to identify early the students who are unable to cope with academic texts and to coach them in reading improvement courses which

should include advanced reading skills, critical thinking and reading rate improvement as well as listening and speaking skills. Such a course could also help students to acquire what Dornyei & Thurrell (1991) advocate: strategic competence. This concerns the ability to express oneself in the face of difficulties or limited language knowledge. It concerns the ability to get one's meaning across successfully to communicative partners, especially when problems arise in the communication process. Examples of strategies students can use are asking for help, verbally or non-verbally, interrupting, paraphrasing, using approximations. (Dornyei & Thurrell, 1991)

Loh (1991), studied 48 Malay ITM students in their one semester pre-Diploma programme in Mass Communication in ITM, Melaka. His main findings were that self-generated pre-question strategy was useful in facilitating the comprehension of expository text among high and low proficiency subjects especially in textually implicit and scriptally implicit questions, though not in textually explicit questions.

Language lecturers tend to focus heavily on instruction in grammar. While it is important for students to acquire grammatical competence, it is equally important for students to understand how language is used in relation the structure of society and its "patterns of inner and outer relationships" (Rivers, 1992), if they are to avoid clashes, misunderstandings and hurt. If one is to analyse the sociolinguistic competence of second language learners, one has to take a step back from a narrow focus on the linguistic forms used in speech acts and ask: What happens to

people's language when they interact socially? (Rivers, 1992). What, for example, are the learners' scripts for a college lecture class? For a service encounter? For consultation with a lecturer? And how do these differ from the scripts of native speakers of the language? An investigation of the expectations and scripts of language learners with regard to the social norms relating to interactions in particular settings can be very helpful to the classroom teacher in deciding how to help students develop sociolinguistic skills in the language. (Tarone & Yule, 1989)

Students do not generally enter into a dialogue with lecturers. They do have exchanges about general things –weekend outings, life at home, movies – but less frequently about studies. Yet, interaction as Heath (1982, p. 104) suggests is at the “heart of reading both learning to read and reading to learn ...”. Manzo (1980, p. 146-147) shares the same view when he talks about “oral languaging” referring to a “discussion structured to promote a reciprocal ... exchange between the teacher and students, so that they may influence one another's thinking and language behaviors.” Basing his theory on Sapir Whorf's theory that the language (referring to the words one knows and tends to speak) one uses has a greater influence on the person speaking than on the one listening, he reasons that to be taught new ways of speaking is tantamount to being taught new ways of understanding, thinking and acting.

Thus when a student is taught to read and to ‘language’ better, the likelihood is that s/he is being taught how to think and feel differently as well. From this we can infer that the value of altering

a student's way of 'linguaging' or speaking and thinking, can have a profound influence on the student's affect to the extent of heightening the individual's willingness and determination to read and to study in a given discipline. (Manzo, 1980, p.147)

Manzo (1980), following the thinking of the content area reading movement, believes that developmental skills such as reading, languaging and thinking need to be nurtured continuously and rather explicitly throughout the school years and even in college, and that the content area lecturer is in the best position in terms of daily contact with students to promote these skills concurrently with the skills and objectives of each content class. He has fashioned three instructional methods of universal applicability. First is the oral reading strategy which has the teacher periodically (once a week) read aloud a brief selection (about two pages) of a text while students follow along in their textbooks. The teacher then asks students to paraphrase ideas at logical points. The confusions revealed, questions raised and incidental help rendered with vocabulary, author style, basic concepts and key questions make this a solid content area reading and languaging lesson. The second is C T Q which is a reminder to lecturers to isolate key concepts, terminology and key questions around which a unit of study is built and to teach these in advance of reading. This method is especially valuable when combined with the next, which helps students learn how to arrive at the central concepts, language and thoughts of a unit by their own wit and analysis. In this method the teacher announces a topic to the class and explains the rules of the interaction.

Students are told that they must learn all that they can about the topic solely by their questions, after which they are given a test on the topic which, they are told, will cover all the information the lecturer considers to be important, whether or not the students extract the information from the lecturer with their questions. The test is given. A class discussion follows in which note is made of the questions raised and those which should have been. Then the students are directed to read their texts carefully or listen to a short lecture to discover what they failed to learn through their initial questions. An optional next step is to give a follow-up test. The combined scores from the first and second tests are a good index of a student's growth in grasp of key ideas and facts (Manzo, 1980).

Content lecturers cannot ignore the fact the students may not know how to read their academic texts and are not interested in their work. The methods suggested above will not only help students to cope, it will also help them to see the relevance of what they are studying and to make the connections with their own experiences.

In an incisive ethnographic study of three communities, one that is a part of the mainstream and two communities that are not part of the mainstream, Heath (1982, p.97) found that in some communities, "...the ways of schools and institutions are very similar to the ways learned at home; in other communities the ways of school are merely an overlay on the home-taught ways and may be in conflict with them". She studied the various ways in which children 'take' from

books, sometimes referred to as 'cognitive or learning styles'. It is generally accepted in the research literature that learning styles are influenced by early socialisation experiences as well as other features of the society in which the child is brought up such as social organization, reliance on authority and roles distinguished by gender. These styles fall into two broad categories – 'field-dependent and field-independent or analytic-relational. The analytic/field-independent style correlates with high achievement and general academic and social success in school.

Much of the literature on learning styles suggests that a preference for one or the other is learned in the social group in which the child is reared and in connection with other ways of behaving found in that culture. But how is a child socialised into an analytic/field independent style? What kind of interactions does he enter into with his parents and the stimuli of his environment that contribute to the development of such a style of learning? (Heath, 1982, p.103).

How, for instance, might the behaviour of a child reared in a home where children are meant to be seen and not heard, where children are not allowed to question the authority of a parent and where they do not discuss matters or events or talk about what they read in the newspapers or what they see on television with parents, affect the behaviour of that child in a classroom?

Some students do expect lecturers to cast a benevolent light over them much as an elder sister or brother or a parent does and it may come as surprise to them that lecturers are indifferent. The findings suggest that students first need to know that lecturers 'care for them' as a parent would before they would get interested in what the lecturer has to say. The Malay lecturer interviewed in this study remarked: "I have to feed them, get close to them before they will break the academic ice." Perhaps what this points to is the need to acculturate students into the ways of college life.

Naimah (1991) found a significant relationship between adjustment to academic work and academic achievement. She found that help with financial and health problems did not have a significant relationship. Her study points to the need to focus on academic preparation, not so much on welfare. She did a survey of 551 students in a college in Shah Alam that caters to Malay students and found on doing a variation regression analysis, that of the nine variables slated to affect academic achievement: family problems, financial problems, adaptation to academic work, curriculum and teaching methods, vocational problems, attitudinal and religious problems, personal psychological relations, social-psychological problems and health and physical development – the one most significant variable was adaptation to academic work not attitude or financial problems. She suggested therefore that the institution prepare the students by way of orientation for life on campus and in particular, by tutoring them in study skills. In fact ITM is at present thinking of reintroducing study skills in its orientation programme.

Naimah also suggested that tutorial class size be reduced and that there be more dialogue between students and lecturers during consultation hours in the lecturers' rooms.

5.3 Directions for further research.

The four subjects interviewed in this study did not actively monitor their own comprehension and, when comprehension failed, did not use intervention strategies such as question-generation to foster comprehension. Why are students unable to formulate question that seek clarification? The reason for this seems to be that they are frequently operating at the decoding level when faced with texts that are lexically dense and complex in terms of sentence structure. At what level are they able to read may be a more pertinent question that needs to be studied. Furthermore, one might say with some measure of certainty that these students are not fluent readers in English, but an interesting question is, are they fluent readers in Bahasa Malaysia and are they able to transfer their reading skills in Bahasa Malaysia to English and if not, why not? How do content lecturers in school and in college view reading?

Many interesting insights have been gained from the interviews with students in this study which could be studied in greater depth. A surprising finding is the aversion that students have for reading not only in L2 but also in L1. It would be useful to find out why students do not seem to like to read, whether they read at all, whether they are able to read to learn, whether they are ready for college-level

reading and what effect the lack of interest in reading has on students' cognitive abilities and on their knowledge of the world. Is reading taught in schools and if so, how is it taught? What elements in a students' home environment creates in him the interest in reading?

Another subject that needs to be studied more closely is that of the students' socialisation experiences in the home environment in relation to discussing ideas and seeking clarification. Is there a discussion of ideas at home? Do family members talk about what they see on television or read in the newspapers in a reflective way? Is the tendency to do that dependent on socio-economic background? And if so does it place at a disadvantage in the college classroom, a student who comes from a poor home?

Yet another subject that needs further study is whether students regard lecturers as like parents or elders and if this is so, why this is so and what the students' expectations are of the lecturers. How does the culture that a student comes from inhibit his willingness to talk to people he views as authority figures? How does a students' relationship with figures of authority influence his relationship with the lecturer with regard to question-asking? Do a student's socialisation experiences at home inhibit question-asking or even his readiness to speak up?

5.4 Limitations

This study is based on interviews with four students who were weak in their studies and who did not speak up in class. As such, the findings are specific to these students and are not generalisable to the student population. It has nonetheless provided insights that may serve as leads for further research.