

The Difficulties of Learning English

What the students say

It is only fair that the voice of the student should also be heard in a magazine for the English teacher, and we hope that our readers will find interest in the following article,

which is made up of actual comments by students about their difficulties in learning English. We have allowed the students' English to stand as it was written, because

the mistakes made seem to emphasize not only their difficulties in learning but also the earnestness with which these Malay-medium students throw themselves into the task of mastering the language.

We start at the bottom of the language scale. A newly enrolled Lower VI Form student confesses his inadequacies (and, reveals, incidentally, the difficulties his teachers are going to have to teach him) –

“In the sixth form I have many problems. One of the problems is I don’t understand read the English books. After that I must much studies very hard in English Languages because very lots of the books of the Economic, History, Geography in the English.”

We can see how necessary good teaching is for such a student in order to bring him up to a level where he can read texts in English, and yet –

“Now, in my class have 87 pupil. All the pupil sit in the one class. I can’t study very carefully because in my school don’t have enough teacher for teach me ... Many pupil cannot have text book for study. Also have not a book for refference.”

When the student moves on from the Lower VI Form, he still faces basic language problems –

“I still makes simple mistakes in grammar when writing essays and precis, especially the tenses. I doesn’t know how to choose the correct words to express my ideas. When it comes to making sentences, I cannot arrange the sentence as it is to my ideas.”

The revelation there, of course, is of the inadequacy of the teaching that can allow a student who can use a complicated structure such as “when it comes to making sentences” to continue making such elementary mistakes with the Present tense. The students themselves are unaware how much their weakness in language affects their ability to communicate in English, but they feel keenly that they have ideas which they cannot express –

“In writting essays I just can’t write with continuous ideas that I have, although I have jot down all the points. Secondly in paragraphing the essay I really don’t know which one to put in the first paragraph ... in writting precis I find difficult in choosing which points is to write down and which one is to left behind.”

“When I have an idea in my mind, it is difficult for me to construct or to write a suitable sentence that represents my idea.”

“I can only manage to convey the idea that I want after a long and round-the-bush way.”

This last student, who writes excellent English, complains of lack of ideas –

“I tried to think about what I have seen and what I have read but I find myself unable to think further than what I have already written down.”

This complaint of lack of fluency is frequently made, more often about speech than writing –

“I found that although I have learned by heart I am still unable to make full use of my vocabullary and knowledge especially in my speech. I think the main reason lies on the fact that my contact with English is not as good as it is required. I don’t have many friends who are willing to speak English ... and to become worse, most of them have the same problems as as mine.”

This weakness in spoken English is a natural result of the students’ environment, as this one points out –

“As I was living in a community where the people (including myself) are very fond of talking in the native language, therefore I was unable to exercise my English fully. Even in school I talked Malay, though I was in an English school, as most of my friends were Malays.”

Many of these students confess to shyness in using English in public –

“We are very shy to talk in English with our fellow-students. Some students keep on replying in Malay even when we try to speak in English to them.”

“... because he may afraid that people might laugh of his ‘broken English’. Infurity complex or stage fright may included too.”

Some students have difficulty in understanding their teacher –

“I always confused when a lecturer speaks inunderstandable English without considering that some of us come from Malay-medium schools. To become worse, I found that some of our lecturers in other subjects use own-style English, which is far from being fit with what we have been taught.”

When we turn to consider their difficulties with reading, we find some pertinent comments. Here is a student who confesses his own faults –

“The fact is that I am lazy and whenever I started to read a book my mind feels empty and only thinks about what show will come at eight o’clock on the first or second channel.”

Here is one who knows that he needs help –

“Another problem is that we are not encouraged to read story books. Teachers or lecturers are not bothered to tell us which books are good for us.”

A student who is trying to read by himself encounters another obstacle –

“When I look up a difficult word in the dictionary, the meaning given in the dictionary sometime differs totally to the real meaning of the word in the sentence.”

Here is a student who can analyse his own trouble –

“Often when reading I cannot quote the major argument that is to say that I am difficulties in following the argument of a certain passage. This is when the passage is too complicated. It does not mean that I do not understand the English structure or the construction of sentences. It is mainly that I often found myself lost in the passage itself.”

We finish by quoting from a student who started from the same language level as the author of our first quota-

tion; but after six months’ intensive tuition he could make his points clearly enough.

“I would be grateful if you can show me the way to improve my English. I have been schooling for nearly twelve years but I cannot speak a proper English.

One of my problems is that the using of prepositions, for example *by*, *to* and *with*. I do now know where to place all these prepositions in the correct place. Sometimes I mix them where they are used in the sentences.

My second problem is that when answering the comprehension questions I cannot answer them with my own words. I tend to take the answers from the passage.

My next problem is vocabulary. When my friend asks about the maning of certain words, I know the word but I cannot express the meaning of it.”

And he finishes with the question that all these students we have quoted from are asking their teachers – “This is my problem – can you show me how to tackle it?”