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 reference.”

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

"I still makes simple mistakes in grammar when writ-
ing 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 com-
plicated structure such as “when it comes to making sen-
tences” to continue making such elementary mistakes
with the Present tense. The students themselves are un-
aware 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 writing 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 writing precis I find difficult in choosing which
points is to write down and which one is to left be-
hind.”

"When I have an idea in my mind, it is difficult for me
to construct or to write a suitable sentence that repres-
ts 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 vocabulary 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 be-
come 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 (in-
cluding myself) are very fond of talking in the native
language, therefore I was unable to exercise my Eng-
lish 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 Eng-
lish 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’. Infirmitly complex or stage fright
may included too.”

Some students have difficulty in understanding their
teacher —

"I always confused when a lecturer speaks inunder-
standable English without considering that some of
us come from Malay-medium schools. To become
worse, I found that some of our lecturers in other sub-
jects 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 quotation; 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 meaning 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?"