FEATURES OF DISCUSSION SKILLS OF HIGH ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PERFORMERS AMONG PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The declining standard of English language proficiency among students in Malaysia has been alarming as many of them are unable to use the English language effectively when they step into the working world. The main complaint by the employers is their inability to express themselves effectively especially during discussions. Research on oral communication skills of secondary school students is scarce. This study explored and described problems faced by students during discussions, identified the preferred teaching strategies by teachers and students in speaking classes, and examined features of a good discussion. A Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design was conducted in three phases. The first phase involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The respondents were one hundred and forty-six students who were preparing themselves for *Malaysian University English Test* (MUET) and eighty-eight teachers who were teaching the subjects in the state of Johor. Based on the survey, the findings showed the problems faced by the students included the inability of using the language components, mainly the use of language expressions, and also in initiating and maintaining the discussions. In addition, the students and teachers preferred to have more video and audio samples be used in speaking classes. The qualitative data were obtained from observations of discussions by eight Low Performers. The investigation revealed problems faced by the students which included initiating and maintaining the discussions, and these supported the findings from the quantitative data. In the second phase, a collection of group discussions by twenty-four High Performers were recorded and analysed using *Genre* and *Conversation Analysis* approaches to establish features of a good discussion, highlight the turn-taking strategies and identify essential elements of adjacency pairs. Finally, in the final phase and based on the earlier findings, a guide for teaching speaking skills was produced for English language teachers to help them prepare their students with discussion skills.

ABSTRAK

Kemerosotan piawai dalam penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar di Malaysia adalah membimbangkan kerana ramai di antara mereka tidak dapat menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dengan berkesan apabila mereka melangkah ke dunia pekerjaan. Aduan yang sering didengari dari pihak majikan adalah pekerja mereka tidak dapat terlibat dalam perbincangan secara berkesan. Penyelidikan terhadap kemahiran pelajar dalam komunikasi lisan amat sedikit. Kajian ini telah menerokai pemasalahan yang telah dihadapi oleh pelajar semasa perbincangan, mengenal pasti pendekatan pengajaran yang digemari oleh guru-guru dan pelajar dalam kelas bertutur, serta meneliti ciri-ciri perbincangan yang baik. Reka bentuk kajian yang menggunakan kaedah campuran bagi penerangan berurutan telah dilaksanakan dalam tiga fasa. Fasa pertama melibatkan pengumpulan data kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Responden yang terlibat terdiri daripada seratus empat puluh enam orang pelajar yang sedang membuat persediaan bagi menduduki peperiksaan *Malaysian University English Test* (MUET) dan lapan puluh orang guru yang mengajar subjek ini di negeri Johor. Berdasarkan kaji selidik tersebut, masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar termasuklah kelemahan dalam penggunaan ungkapan bahasa, serta dalam memulakan dan mengekalkan perbincangan. Pelajar dan guru juga menyuarakan keperluan terhadap bahan video dan audio sebagai bahan bantuan mengajar dalam kelas bertutur. Data kualitatif pula telah diperolehi dari pengamatan terhadap rakaman perbincangan oleh lapan orang pelajar dari kumpulan pelajar berprestasi rendah. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar termasuk dalam memulakan dan mengekalkan perbincangan dan dapatan ini telah menyokong dapatan yang telah diperolehi dari data kuantitatif. Dalam fasa kedua, satu koleksi rakaman perbincangan oleh dua puluh empat orang pelajar dari kumpulan pelajar berprestasi tinggi telah dibuat dengan menggunakan pendekatan Analisa Genre dan Analisa Perbualan telah digunakan untuk mengenal pasti ciri-ciri perbincangan yang baik, mengemukakan strategi bagi menentukan giliran bercakap dan menentukan unsur-unsur penting dalam membentuk pasangan giliran. Akhirnya, di fasa terakhir, berdasarkan dapatan dari fasa-fasa yang terdahulu, satu panduan telah dapat dihasilkan untuk guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam membantu mereka untuk menyediakan pelajar mereka dengan kemahiran bertutur untuk perbincangan.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CA	-	Conversation Analysis
GA	-	Genre Analysis
MUET	-	Malaysian University English Test
DA	-	Discourse Analysis
CS	-	Communication Strategies
RQ	-	Research Question
CADQAS	-	Computer Aided Qualitative Analysis Software

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

It is inevitable that communication takes place when information is expressed or exchanged. Communication also occurs when one shares one's ideas, thoughts or feelings. The intentions of conveying information, ideas, thoughts or feelings to another party or receiver have the expectation that the receiving party will be able to understand them as what they are intended to be. Thus, communication plays a crucial part in everyone's life. Canale (1983) highlights that communication is a form of social interaction. It involves unpredictability and creativity in form and message, taking place in discourse and socio-cultural contexts, giving room to limited appropriate language use and interpretations of utterances. Communication also takes place under constrains like fatigue and distractions. Despite the challenges and complications, communication will always occur with a purpose, in establishing social relations. Due to the common pattern of communication which requires more than one participant, it could be very dynamic, allowing the speakers to accomplish their intended objectives, for example to persuade or to promise.

Byrne (1976:8) explains that in oral communication, speakers and listeners go through the two-way process involving the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skills of listening and understanding. The speaker first will have to encode his message in the appropriate language and the listener will then decode or interpret the message. Most of the time, the listener will depend on the information that come

together in the message and also other features such as intonation, as well as body language and facial expressions. All these interpretations come from the commonly used information and features which allow common interpretations by the listener. This is also explained by Jamaliah Mohd Ali (2000), showing how communication helps the members in a culture to act and think in the appropriate way, which is acceptable in the discourse community.

Looking at the complexity of the roles of communication, West & Turner (2009) have listed five key terms involved in communication. These five key terms involve communication as a social process, as a process, as symbols, as a meaning and also as environment. Being a member of a society, one will have one or more of these roles embedded in their social practices, and these roles will be recognised by the other members of the society. This process will be the key to the success of a communication.

Maier (2001) looks at communication, focusing on negotiation as "a particular form of handling conflicts." Whenever a problem arises, a solution must be found. As a member of a society, it is a norm for a discussion to take place, allowing each member to voice out his point of views. Finally, a decision will be made, taking everyone's opinion into consideration and weighing every advantage and disadvantage mentioned.

Ghauri & Usunier (1996) see negotiation, being part of communication, requires a higher level of skills which needs a person to be able to plan, strategise, use appropriate tactics, be aware of work culture and people culture to make decisions and persuade others to agree with his decisions. This means that in order to go to the level that involves a person to be in a discussion and negotiate, he will need to prepare himself with more skills than if he is just hanging around to have a chat. This is because in a discussion, the main objective for the speakers is to find a conclusion, an agreement, and of course to have everyone else agree to one's opinion. Hindle (1998) and Baguley (2000) highlight that communications enable speakers to come to a mutual agreement. Halpern (1992) stressed that it will be an ultimate goal for having others to agree to one's opinion.

The dynamic of a communication process is inevitable. Menkel-Meadow (1994) perceives communication as a process that cannot be fulfilled alone – a back and forth communication to reach an agreement as some interlocuters do have some shared interest while the other members do not. Communication is recognized as a process of compromising and cooperation.

The complexity of communication demonstrates the importance of skills that need to be acquired to allow the interlocuters to participate effectively. Hence Malaysian Education System has put its attention towards the communication skills, including communication in the English Language which has a role as a second language. English is perceived as essential due to its function as an international language, linking the whole world together. English is also the language of knowledge as many reference books on various subjects are written in English, and it is also one of the major languages of the internet. Thus, with such vital value that English language has, the syllabus for Primary and Secondary Schools for English Language in Malaysia have put the emphasis on the stages of proficiency that the students must acquire within the time determined (*please refer to* Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2000 *and* Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2001).

The students are expected to be equipped with the skills of communication in English Language in order to be able to access the knowledge on the internet and to communicate effectively with others locally and internationally (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2000). These skills are further developed in the syllabus for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which focuses on measuring the students' proficiency in English Language before they pursue their studies at the tertiary level. At this level, the students are assumed to be an effective English Language user, able to utilize the English Language well for obtaining information and knowledge from books and other media, participate well in discussions based on the topics covered, and able to deliver their ideas and theories clearly in discussions, paper presentations and seminars (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006).

The development of the skills that the students should be acquiring has been thought thoroughly by the national education system. The primary level focuses on the mastering of the basic of English Language – grammar, intonation and pronunciation. Then, the Secondary level looks at the application of the English Language within the context of various subjects and current issues. The students are required to acquire the skills of solving local problems and issues, and gradually moving on to the ones outside the country. By the end of the programme, the students should be able to discuss and analyse problems effectively by using English Language as the tool of communication. At the tertiary level, the students are later required to be able to utilise their language skills to participate in a more matured discourse. The literature for their source of reference and the mode of their communications will mostly be done in formal manner. The students will also have to produce reports and essays accordingly. To ensure that the students are equipped with the essential skills before they move on to the tertiary level, the Higher Education Ministry has made it mandatory for the students to sit for MUET test and achieve a certain band before they are allowed to register for their courses.

1.2 Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is the highest stage of assessment for English Language proficiency conducted at the national level. It has been designed to gauge the level of students' English Language proficiency based on the four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The four skills are assessed individually in four different papers, and the distributions of the percentage for the marks as well as the maximum marks for the individual papers contributing to the final score are shown in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: The distribution of the scores according to the skills assessed in MUET.

SKILLS	DURATION	PERCENTAGE	MAXIMUM SCORE
Listening	30 minutes	15%	45
Speaking	30 minutes	15%	45
Reading	90 minutes	40%	120
Writing	90 minutes	30%	90
AGGREGATED SCORE			**300**

Source: Malaysian Examinations Council

The aggregated score will be the final score which will then be translated into bands. There are six bands altogether indicating the students' proficiency level, with band 6 displaying the highest proficiency (*please refer to Appendix A*).

1.3 Background of the Problem: An Overview of English Language Development in Malaysia

English Language was introduced to Malaysia during the British Occupation (1826). Trading operations of the East India Company caused English Language to be used locally and hence creating the sense of importance in learning the language. Royalties, rich families and some middle-income families sent their children to English-medium schools to master the language. As a result, Malaya (Malaysia was named before Independence) had been renowned to be among the EFL countries with highest number of speakers who can speak native-like British English.

Since Malaysia achieved the independence in 1957, the Malaysian Government had started to gradually implement the national language policy, and in 1970 onwards, the national education system was focused on the use of the national language as the medium of instruction. Hence, the impact of the change had caused the students in national schools to be exposed most of their time in school to Bahasa Malaysia for all subjects except for a small allocation of time for English Language. The national language itself has gained its importance to be used in meetings and all official documents. Soon enough, the English Language has been used very

limitedly, causing those who lived in the rural areas not to see the need of using the language outside of their English Language classes.

Mustafa (2009) mentions that regardless of how insignificant some people might feel of the need to be proficient in the English language, having a low proficiency in the language will cause Malaysians to face problems in getting good employment especially with international companies. They will also face hardship in furthering their studies as many faculties use English language as their means of instruction and most references are in English. Since many people especially those in the rural areas are not proficient in the English language, Mustafa (2009) laments on the possibility that the focus of the teaching of English language in certain areas in Malaysia should be considered to be TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) instead of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Her worry towards the need to change the teaching approach is earlier mentioned by Asmah (1982) cited in Mohd Ali (2000) who highlights the importance of being proficient in English language. This is because private sectors and business companies will be more interested in employing those with good English language proficiency. This is mainly due to the nature of their business which will have to deal with local and foreign companies. Some companies even use English language at all levels of operations. Pereira, Louis and Lok (2002) discover that the most common skills in English language being used in a workplace are, speaking and writing, while Rohany (2003) in her study finds a significant emphasis in oral communication at the workplace.

Singh, Leong & Ong (2011) discover that all four skills, speaking, listening, reading and writing are essential at the workplace. From the questionnaires administered to 59 alumni who graduated from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), the majority mentioned in their feedback that the workplace they were involved in had English as their lingua franca, and despite having graduated with a first degree, 30 percent from the respondents admitted that they still had problems performing well in their jobs concerning the use of English language, among them were in writing reports, interpreting and translating documents, writing letters, memos and emails, negotiating and holding press conferences.

To further investigate the standard of English language in Malaysia, the trend of MUET results from the year 1999 until 2008 will be able to help in showing the students' proficiency. In MUET test, the students are tested based on the four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The graph below shows the students' achievement in MUET test for Speaking papers from year 1999 when MUET was first introduced to the national education system until year 2008.

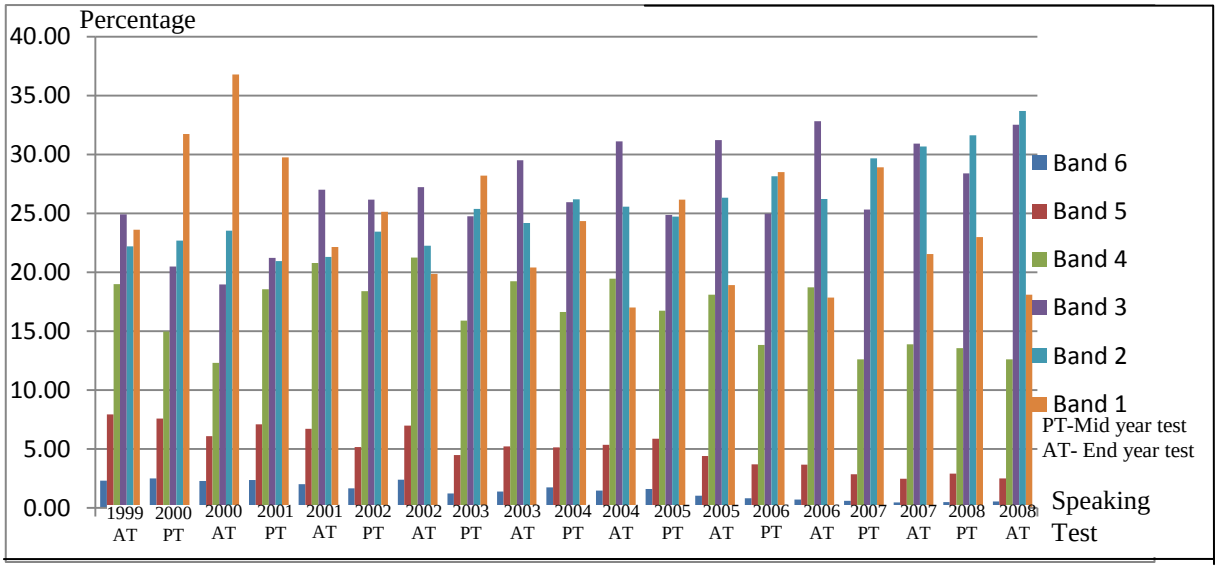

Figure 1.1 : MUET test results 1999 - 2008 for Speaking paper

Source: Malaysian Examinations Council 2009

For the range of ten years, the result above shows that the main bulk of the students are still in the range of Bands One, Two and Three. In MUET examination, Band One refers to students who have very limited ability to function effectively in English language, while Band Two refers to those with little abilities and Band Three are those who are able to function moderately in the language. For details please refer to *Appendix B*. In the second half of the third year after MUET first administrated, the number of students who achieved Band One had reduced as more students were able to gain Bands Two and Three. Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight the downward trend of the percentages for students who achieved Bands Four, Five and Six. These are the achievements of students who had been exposed to the formal teaching of the English language for at least 11 years. After finishing form five, some had the opportunity to continue with the formal teaching of English language in MUET classes for about one and a half year when they re-enter the

secondary school to further their studies in the Pre-University level, known as Form Six.

In order to see the significant role of the MUET Speaking result to the Overall MUET Result, an analysis of Pearson Coefficient test has been carried out. The result will highlight the correlation between MUET Speaking test Result and MUET Overall Result for years 1999 – 2008 (*please refer to Appendix C*). As an illustration, the results for Mid Year Exam 2008 and Year-End 2008 are shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 : Correlation result between MUET Speaking test results and the Overall MUET test results for Mid Year Exam 2008 and Year-End Exam 2008

		PT08	OPT08
PT08	Pearson Correlation	1	,976(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,001
	N	6	6
OPT08	Pearson Correlation	,976(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,001	
	N	6	6

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

		AT08	OAT08
AT08	Pearson Correlation	1	,996(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	6	6
OAT08	Pearson Correlation	,996(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	6	6

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note:

PT08 - *Mid-Year MUET Speaking result for 2008*

OPT08 - *Mid-Year Overall MUET result for 2008*

AT08 - *Year-End MUET Speaking result for 2008*

OAT08 - *Year-End Overall MUET result for 2008*

The data in Table 1.2 shows that that there is a very high level of correlation between the students' MUET Speaking test Result with their Overall MUET test Result as the value of Pearson coefficient shows 0.996 at significant level $p<0.01$. The results for all the tests done show a very high level of correlation between students' MUET Speaking result to their Overall MUET test result, with the lowest value of Pearson coefficient showing 0.72 at significant level of $p<0.05$ for the Year-End 2000 paper. This analysis explains that the students who need to score well in their overall MUET test need to put just as much effort in preparing for the Speaking paper as they do for other papers too.

O' Sullivan (1997) mentions that the possible reasons for students to have difficulty in speaking the second or foreign language will be due to their first language interference, differences in learning expectations and also their reluctance to speak the language. For the case of students in Malaysia, Mustafa (2009) refers to their attitude of not seeing any importance of using the English language anywhere else other than their English language classes.

The environment around them also gives the support to their misjudgement to the English language as there are very limited opportunities for them to practice the English language. So, all these aspects bring weight to their reluctance towards practicing the English language, thus causing them to be less and less proficient in the language.

Richards (1990, 75) explains that it is difficult for a second language learner to achieve the production of fluent speech as the concept of fluency consists of the production of a comprehensible discourse, easy to follow with errors and breakdown free. This brings us to the concept of accuracy too. Hence the degree of fluency that the speaker will be able to project will depend on the task he has to respond to and the context he is involved in. Despite the predicaments every second language learner has to face, oral fluency is the main goal in order to acquire the speaking skills. Byrne (1976:9) defines in a more lenient manner looking at these skills as to be able to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and without too much hesitation. The least one can do is to imitate a certain model, or responding to certain cues, allowing him to express his ideas or thoughts freely with the language.

The ability for self-expressions also goes beyond the aim to accomplish communication. Burton (1975:72) emphasizes that it allows oneself to project a certain image to the public, according to one's intentions. Here, the idea of having a model which gives specific structures of a certain genre will be able to give these students scaffoldings in allowing them to be able to produce similar genres in their effort to participate in the social practices successfully, thus achieving their communication goals.

So, with the current education system which takes place in the classrooms, the students are still showing their weaknesses in participating effectively using the English language. This reflects the need to explore other means and ways to aid the students to be able to perform better in their MUET test, and this brings to the focus of this study – the oral communication skills involved in MUET Speaking paper.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Despite the formal learning of English language for at least eleven years in school, the students still portray difficulties to perform well in their MUET Speaking paper. The students have been taught by trained teachers who have been given courses and trainings in colleges and universities locally and internationally to enable them to have the skills to help the students to acquire the skills of using the English language effectively in their daily social practices.

However, half of the number of candidates who took MUET tests were in Bands One and Two for their Speaking abilities. This shows the true abilities of those secondary school leavers who had the urge to further their studies in the tertiary education. We can just imagine the true level of the English language proficiency of the others who had decided to go straight to try their luck in the working world after secondary school.

In order to further their studies, the students need to achieve a certain level of proficiency in MUET test before they are allowed to enter the universities. Starting

2015, the minimal English proficiency requirement to enter the universities have been raised from Band One to Band Two while some departments have set as high as Band Four for subjects like Medicine, Law and English Literature (*The Star Online, 16th October, 2014*). Even if the requirement is as low as Band Two, that does not mean that the student should be satisfied with it as Band Two refers to one who has little abilities in English Language. This means the students will still have to struggle very hard and suffer a lot of difficulties to function in the language, especially when they are doing their references and presentations.

So, in order to help the students to acquire good skills in the English language, this study focuses on proposing the use of Conversation Analysis Approach to enhance students' speaking skills. Findings from the analysis of good students' group discussions via Conversation Analysis are gathered and used in developing a guideline for the teachers to employ in their speaking classes. It is hoped that this study will be able to assist the teachers to develop their students' communication skills, thus helping them to achieve at least Band Three for their MUET Speaking test.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The main intention of this study was to develop a guideline for the teachers to employ an effective approach in developing discussion skills in pre-university students who are preparing to sit for MUET Speaking test. The guideline was to assist the students to understand the communicational skills which are essential to manage effective discussions.

This guideline would help the teachers to expose the students to the salient linguistic features crucial in maintaining their discussion effectively. The guideline would encourage the students to play their part as researchers and discover the varieties of expressions, giving emphasis on the linguistic functions that need to be carried out throughout their presentation and discussions when responding to the Speaking tasks.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

In order to respond well in a discussion task, the pre-university students should be able to initiate, maintain and participate effectively in the discussion. The students need to show the understanding of the topic given, and are able to express and justify their points of view. Hence, this study was driven by the needs to:

1. identify the teaching preference in the teaching of speaking skills for group discussions, according to the outline for Malaysian University English Test (MUET);
    1.1 The strategies used by the teachers in teaching Speaking skills in MUET Speaking class;
    1.2 The strategies preferred by the students in the teaching of Speaking skills in MUET Speaking class.

2. bring to light the High Performers' preference in practicing English language outside of English language classroom;

3. establish the existing gaps prevailing the views towards students' problems in participating effectively in group discussions based on MUET Speaking paper:
    3.1 The existing gap from the observations made by the teachers teaching MUET subjects and;
    3.2 The existing gap from the experience faced by the students who were preparing for MUET Speaking test;

4. examine the features of a good discussion utilised by the High Performers to perform an effective discussion.

1.7 Research Questions

This study mainly focused on the pre-university students who were currently studying in secondary schools. Feedback was gathered from them to understand their perception towards their performance in group discussions based on MUET Speaking paper, and another feedback was also attained from teachers who were teaching MUET subjects in secondary schools to identify the teaching materials being used in the classrooms, and the students' problems in responding well in the discussion which they have to perform in Task B, MUET Speaking paper.

In addition, group discussions from twenty four pre-university students (6 groups) who were from the High Performer group were also recorded and analysed. All the above actions were implemented to answer these research questions:

1. What are the teaching preferences for the teaching of Speaking skills according to the outline for Malaysian University English Test (MUET)?
    - 1.1 What are the strategies used by the teachers in teaching Speaking skills in MUET Speaking class?
    - 1.2 What are the strategies preferred by the pre-university students in the teaching of Speaking skills in MUET Speaking class?

2. What are the patterns shown by the High Performers in practicing English language and the speaking skills outside of the English classroom?

3. What are the underlying problems faced by the pre-university students to perform well in group discussion based on the MUET Speaking papers?
    - 3.1 What are the underlying problems faced by the pre-university students from the perspectives of the teachers who were preparing their students for the MUET Speaking paper?
    - 3.2 What are the underlying problems from the experience faced by the pre-university students who were going to sit for the MUET Speaking paper?

4. What are the features of a good discussion revealed by the students from the High Performers in their effort to perform an effective discussion?

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study is looking at the discussion skills in general, and uses the MUET Speaking test as the platform for the analysis. Thus, the findings from the study could give an insight to some stakeholders who would benefit from them, namely those who are involved in the process of teaching and learning of English language speaking skills, the curriculum designers for the English language for secondary schools or more advanced levels, and also to those who are involved in the process of the university entrance requirement. Being involved in the process of teaching and learning of the English language, the findings from this study will give the teachers an outline of the skills that they need to focus on when teaching their students the skills for discussions. The suggestions in the outline would be able to give the teachers in a form of a guideline in making their lessons more effective. This will surely benefit the students, especially those who have lower proficiency in English language, as the lessons will be more tailored to their needs.

In addition, this study will also be able to give a clear guidance to English language teachers to attempt another effective approach in teaching speaking skills for discussions. In this study Genre Analysis and Conversation Analysis Approaches have been used in analysing the qualitative data, and the teachers could introduce the approaches in the classroom and allow the younger generations to learn the ropes and will be able to carry out a basic analysis of a qualitative data effectively. Hence, this will encourage long life learning in our young generations – our future leaders. It is often becomes a big task for these language teachers to carry out their lessons especially when they have many students in their classrooms who still do not have a good grasp of the English language despite having learnt the language throughout their primary and secondary education. Thus, this study will hopefully help to lessen the burden of the teachers in finding an accommodating approach for the teaching and learning process in their classrooms.

With the acquisition of the skills to perform effective group discussions, the students are then considered to be equipped with one of the skills required for the university entrance. Other skills required pertaining the English language proficiency are listening, reading and writing. The features of the discussion skills discovered in this study will be able to be one of the guideline for any institutions which are developing their university entrance/exit proficiency requirements.

The curriculum designers will also benefit from this study as the problems faced by the students which were discovered in this study, together with the skills shown by the High Performers during the group discussions could become a guideline in the development of the curriculum. Thus, the designed curriculum will be tailoring to the needs of the local students and will be more effective in developing the students' proficiency in English language.

1.9 Research Scope and Limitation

The main aims of this study were to investigate the lacking of salient linguistic features in the students' group discussions, and strategies employed by the High Performers in conducting effective ones. The findings were then translated into a guideline for the teachers to be used as their teaching aids in their speaking lessons. The variation in the guideline would depend on the results achieved throughout the investigation.

This qualitative study was conducted by involving teachers who were teaching MUET subjects, and students who were preparing themselves for the MUET papers. They were all from the secondary schools in Johor, the southernmost state of Peninsular Malaysia. Therefore, the findings from the responses that had been analysed are only relevant in describing the teachers and students within the Johor state.

This study was also only involving the pre-university students who were preparing for MUET tests and also *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (STPM). They

were aged 19 to 20 years old, pursuing Form Six right after they finished Form Five. They were students who attended government schools. So, the data on their proficiency and the results might differ if the subjects were of a different background. The students respondents were also dominated by the females (please refer to ***Table 4.7)*** who nearly doubled the number of males (n=146). Nevertheless, the study was not looking into the differences in responses by genders, and the gender factor was not taken into the consideration during the interpretation of the data.

The characteristics of the group discussions and the patterns of adjacency pairs discovered in this study were from the investigation performed on six group discussions which were carried out by students from the High Performers. Thus, the findings were only restricted to the transcriptions from the six group discussions. More patterns of turn-taking could be discovered if more group discussions were involved in the study.

1.10 Summary

In the grading guideline for the MUET Speaking paper, the emphasis given to the need of being grammatically correct is such that it is given as much weight in the marks awarded compared to the other two criteria, which are the task fulfilment and communicative fulfilment. This means that the students are not just required to produce utterances which are grammatically correct, but they also have to ensure that they carry out the requirement of the task properly and use the proper communicative language in their response. This will be a disadvantage to the learners who do not have the opportunity to use the English language everyday or having limited exposure to the language. Only those who are from the English speaking family and use the language in their everyday conversation will be able to perform well in this test.

The inadequacy portrayed by the students in their response to the Speaking tasks given creates the urgency to find a remedy for it. The Conversation Analysis

approach had been chosen to be used in this study as it has a strong potential with promising results in enhancing the students' proficiency in their speaking skills. This effort is extremely crucial because the teachers who are teaching MUET subjects would be able to utilise the guidelines given to design materials and lessons which would bring great benefits to the students.

The following chapter will link the underlying theories with this study, which is the Conversation Analysis approach. It will be relating the cited theories with studies which advocated them by applying the theory in real classroom environment. This will give an insight of the impact of this approach in real lessons. Chapter three will continue in explaining in detail of how this study was performed to meet the study objectives and answer the awaiting research questions.

1.11 Operational Definitions

This section provides the operational definitions in this study. These definitions will help the readers to understand what the variables exactly are in this thesis, and thus, will be able to replicate the study in the future.

1.11.1 MUET

MUET refers to the Malaysian University English Test which is a qualification test for Malaysian students in who are going to continue their studies in the tertiary level in Malaysia Malaysian (*Examinations Council, 2006*). The test is to assess the candidates' English language proficiency, and determine the candidates' readiness in applying the English language in the university level.

1.11.2 MUET Speaking Paper

Included in MUET are four papers: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (*Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006*). MUET Speaking paper is coded 800/2. For MUET Speaking paper, there are two sections – Task A (Individual Presentation) and Task B (Group Discussion). This study is based on this MUET Speaking paper – Task B (Group Discussion).

1.11.3 Group Discussion

As mentioned above, there are two tasks in MUET Speaking paper. Task A is referred to as the individual presentation, while Task B focuses on the group presentation. This study was only applied to Task B of the Speaking paper, which is on the group discussion. For the group discussion, the students who are sitting in a group of four are given 10 minutes to discuss on a given situation and find an agreement to conclude it.

1.11.4 Band

MUET scores are based on bands – Band 1 to Band 6. Band 1 classifies candidates who have very limited ability to use the English Language while Band 6 indicates candidates who have the ability to manipulate the English language effectively. The detail descriptions for overall MUET Bands and the specific MUET Speaking Bands can be seen in *Appendices A* and *B*.

1.11.5 Pre-University Students

Students who have achieved good results in their Form Five public examination – Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia – and decide to further their studies to do the first degree in the tertiary level will have to enter either the Foundation Centre, Matriculation Centre or become the Form Six students in the public or private schools before they are able to enter the faculties in the varsities. Some will do diploma programmes instead. These students will be required to sit for MUET test and achieve appropriate bands before they will be allowed to apply any first degree programme at the universities. For this study, the students in focus were the ones who were in Form Six in the public schools, and throughout the thesis, they were referred to as 'students' or 'Pre-University Students'.

1.11.6 MUET teachers

The reference above is for teachers who are preparing students who are sitting for MUET papers. The MUET teachers are teaching the four skills which are essential for the students, as they need to perform well in the four papers tested in MUET papers : Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

1.11.7 High Performers, Average Performers and Low Performers

In schools, students sit for school-based tests similar to MUET papers, and the teachers mark them according to the marking criteria set by the Malaysian Examinations Council (*please refer to Appendices A and B*). The reference to **High Performers** in this study refers to respondents who had scored Bands 5 and 6 for their school-based speaking test, while the **Average Performers** are those who achieved Bands 3 and 4 for their speaking paper. **Low Performers** is a reference to those who attained Bands 1 and 2 for their speaking test.

1.11.8 Discourse Analysis

The study of language use by the members of a speech community is referred to as discourse analysis. The exploration of the language involves both the forms and functions, and includes spoken and written forms. For written texts, the focus could be looking at the topic development and cohesion across the sentences, and for spoken language, the focus could be on the patterns of turn-taking or opening and closing sequences of talks. The vast disciplines which involve the practice of discourse analysis have developed various theoretical perspectives and analytic approaches, such as speech act theory, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, genre analysis, and conversation analysis. These varieties of disciplines do agree that language is a tool for social interaction, but only to look at the different aspects of language use.

1.11.9 Conversation Analysis Approach

The Conversation Analysis approach had been primarily an approach to social action (Schegloff 1996), and was initially started by a group of sociologists before it was adopted into the field of linguistics by Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1972). It looks into the sequences of actions in a talk and the construction of a turn in a talk. This study had applied the approach of Conversation Analysis to look at the features of a group discussion and the patterns of the turn-taking.

1.11.10 Genre Analysis Approach

The Genre Analysis Approach refers to an approach which investigates a particular genre, learning the features which cover the physical layout to the use of the words and phrases (Painter, 2001). The application of this approach in this study was to identify the structures of the group discussions according to their functions.

1.11.11 Turn-taking

The changes of talks by speakers in a conversation are referred as turn-taking. This study looks at the exchanges of talks made by the speakers in their attempts to perform effective group discussions. From the patterns of turn-taking performed, the problems faced by the students could be identified, and the strategies of the High Performers could be examined and learned.

1.11.12 Adjacency pairs

In a conversation, usually there will be pairs in the exchanges of talks made by the speakers, for example greeting – greeting, question – answer, request – respond. These pairs are reflecting the expected responses made by the second speakers whenever the first speaker produced the first part of the pair. This study also looked at the patterns of the adjacency pairs performed by the High Performers during their group discussions.

1.11.13 Strategies

In responding to the speaking test, the candidates will be administrating the group discussions which include the turn-taking, ensuring the proper adjacency pairs, agreeing, disagreeing, supporting with ideas, asking for clarifications and others. These are the strategies that the candidates use to maintain the discussions within the time given, which is ten minutes.

1.12 Organisation of the thesis

This study looks into the features of good discussions that will be a guide for the English language teachers to prepare their students with the discussion skills. Thus, the organisation of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 explains the outline of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), and continues with the outline of the MUET Speaking paper which is the chosen platform in this study for the analysis of the features of a discussion. The description of Discourse Analysis Approach is also reviewed in this chapter, focusing on the Genre and Conversation Analysis Approaches which are used in the analyses of the features of discussions skills of High Performers among the pre-university students. Features of a discussion described by other researchers are then reviewed and discussed to show how this study is distinguished from other works.

Chapter 3 describes the procedures of the study, which is the Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design, including a brief description of a *Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software* (CAQDAS) which is *Transana 2.4*, the tool used in transcribing and analysing the qualitative data. Through the analyses, the features of a discussion performed by High Performers were discovered.

Chapter 4 explains and discusses the findings of the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaires distributed to the MUET teachers and candidates, and the qualitative data from the transcribed group discussions. The chapter highlights the problems faced by the students and their needs in performing well in group discussions, teachers' teaching styles and students' preferred learning styles in the learning speaking skills, and also the features of a discussion by High Performers.

Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the findings by answering the research questions and concludes the thesis. A guideline to the preferred strategies in discussion skills is presented, and possible directions of future researches are also discussed. The guideline is also prepared in the form of power point slide shows which can be used as teaching aids by the teachers.

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