

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative case study of dialogue journal writing between the teacher and her ESL student, I, as teacher-researcher, sought to gain insights into what I saw as three significant facets in this process. I was intrigued to find out what are the contextual dimensions involved in dialogue journal writing, what are the socio-psychological dimensions involved in dialogue journal writing and what is the nature of language use in the dialogue journal.

In this chapter I describe the procedures I used to conduct the investigation. To delineate the context of the research, I provide a discussion of the research site and the beginnings of this present study. This is then followed by a description of the key participants as well as the procedures for data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Research Site

I teach in a Technical and Vocational school. The students of my school, Sekolah Menengah Teknik Kencana¹ (SMTK), join the school in Form 4 and leave after sitting for their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination in Form 5. More than 99% of the students in this school are Malays. Although SMTK is an urban school in the state of Selangor, its academic achievement is not comparable with other urban Technical and Vocational schools. In 1999, SMTK ranked second last for the Technical stream and last for the Vocational stream amongst all the

¹ In this study, the names of the school and students have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Technical and Vocational schools in Malaysia in terms of percentage passes for the SPM examination. Generally, the students in the Vocational stream are not academically inclined and are merely serving time in school while the students in the Technical stream are largely mediocre with only a sprinkling of good students clustered in the best Form 4 and Form 5 classes.

This study involved the English language teacher and a key participant from Form 5 Engineering 1 (5E1). To get a better picture of 5E1, I will provide a brief sketch of the class (see Appendix H for a student's essay about this class). In 5E1 there were 34 male and six female students whose ages ranged from 17 to 18 years. Except for two male students, a Bajau (the key student-participant in this study) and an Indian, the rest of the students were Malays. 5E1 was the best class in the Technical stream as the students were selected to join the class based on their overall academic achievements in the Form 4 final examination. However, where English was concerned, only four out of the 40 students in the class could speak English fluently. The rest of the students did not feel at ease using the language and if asked to speak in English, they did so haltingly. Thus, in relation to general proficiency in the language, most of these students could be categorised as below-average or average learners.

3.2 Beginnings of the Study

In April 2000, the 1999 SPM examination results were released. SMTK's results indicated that there was a decline in student passes for that year. To our consternation, we found our school relegated to the second last and last positions in the Technical and Vocational schools' league table. Staff meetings were held,

teachers were told to submit reports, to justify what they had achieved or not achieved and to come up with plans for improving teaching. Pressures were exerted on teachers and they, in turn, pressured their own students to 'wake up from their slumber' and start delivering the grades that were expected of them. Following our dismal achievements, my own discontentment with my 5E1 students' lackadaisical attitude in learning English mounted. They did not bother to do the work that they were asked to do and when they did do it, the quality was found wanting. I pled with and cajoled them to change their attitude. Against such a backdrop, I told my 5E1 students that they could write in a journal their feedback of my teaching so that I could improve it to meet their learning needs. One male student put up his hand and asked if he could write on topics of his choice and I agreed. Thus we began dialoguing with each other. Upon reading his second journal entry, it became clear to me that he would be giving me rich and interesting data that I could use for investigating student-teacher dialogue journal writing. That prompted me to undertake this study (see Appendix D).

Significantly, another event also helped to jump-start this research process. Our use of dialogue journal as a means of communication was facilitated by an important factor. Uprooted from the familiar environment that he was nurtured in and replanted in a 'new' school terrain which he found to be different and hostile, the key participant in this study was a recent arrival in SMTK. As a result of this transition, there was an acute need in him to communicate his cares and concerns so as to enable him to overcome the culture shock that he was undergoing. Thus when given the dialogue journal as a means of communicating with his teacher, he grabbed it as though it was a lifeline - a lifeline that gave him the opportunity and

space to make sense of his new surroundings and to reorder his disrupted life. Here was a participant who willingly committed himself to this interactive process of writing. But I, as the teacher-researcher, was not at all sure how I was going to reconcile what happened in our interactive writing to the learning of ESL. It was an intriguing problem that I had no ready answer for. Indeed I did not know what was going to emerge in our dialogue - whether the topics we 'talked' about would have any relevance to the teaching and learning of ESL. But we carried on anyway because there was a real need for real writing to communicate real concerns. Consequently, within this naturalistic environment, an emic perspective using a qualitative case study method became the natural approach for me to conduct a systematic study of this phenomenon to unearth insights for improving ESL pedagogy.

Having described the research site and beginnings of the study, I will next describe the two key participants in this research.

3.3 The Key Participants

The key participants in this study were Mazlan, the student participant, and myself as teacher-researcher. The study took place during the 2000 school year when I taught English in Form 5E1 where Mazlan was a student.

3.3.1 The Student Participant

Mazlan was the only student who responded to my call to participate in dialogue journal writing. Based on data from my first interview with him and my

informal observations of him, I will provide a description of my student-participant.

Mazlan, or Lan as he calls himself, is an ethnic Bajau Muslim from East Malaysia. He was born on 2nd March 1982 in Kudat, Sabah. He is the second son in a family of six male siblings. His father works as a mechanic in JKR (Public Works Department) while his mother is a home-maker. Prior to the year 2000, Mazlan lived and studied in Sabah. However, in January 2000, Mazlan's father followed his employer to Kuala Lumpur, in West Malaysia, to work. Together with his parents and eldest brother, Mazlan left his homeland and replanted himself in a 'new' school where he suffered the experience of 'tissue rejection'.

Largely due to the educational and social backgrounds that he came from, Mazlan stood out as different from the rest of the students in SMTK. Mazlan speaks three languages - Malay, the official language in Malaysia and also his mother tongue; Mandarin, which is the language of instruction in the primary school that he went to; and English which is taught as a second language in all Malaysian schools. Although Mazlan is a Bajau, he does not speak the Bajau language at all. Mazlan had his initial education in a Chinese primary school where he mixed and socialised with his Chinese schoolmates for six years. After completing his primary education, he began his secondary education in Sekolah Menengah All Saints which had students of various ethnicities. As in his previous school, Mazlan mingled mainly with the Chinese students. Upon completing his Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah (PMR) examination, he went to study in Sekolah Menengah Teknik Likas as he wanted to get a head start in studying Mechanical Engineering. The students in SMT Likas also came from various ethnic

backgrounds. Except for the initial problem of studying in a Chinese school where the language of instruction was almost foreign to him, Mazlan was able to adjust quite well to the different school cultures that he experienced in Sabah. However, the school culture of SMTK which has students from one race, posed a problem and a challenge to him. It was in the context of a dislocated student undergoing the transition of culture shock and growing pains that Mazlan embarked on dialogue journal writing with me.

Mazlan is one person who is always 'hungry' to learn and his 'hunger' never fails to amaze me (see Appendix K). He is a competitive person and this can perhaps be attributed to his strict parents who will punish him if he does not perform well in his studies. Coming from a low-income family, Mazlan knows that he has to work hard if he hopes to obtain a scholarship to study Mechanical Engineering in an institution of higher learning. Indeed, one of Mazlan's chief ambitions in life is to become a successful engineer some day.

3.3.2 The Teacher Participant

To escape the hardship in China during the 1930s, both my parents immigrated to Malaya when they followed their families to Kelantan. I was one of the ten children born to this struggling immigrant couple. With five other siblings before me and four after me, my parents could not afford to pay for my higher education. As such, I left Form Six and went to join a Teacher Training College when offered a scholarship to study there. I taught for more than ten years in a few primary schools before obtaining scholarships to pursue my diploma and then degree in teaching English. These were god-sent opportunities because they gave

me a fresh understanding of the principles and practice of teaching English which I had somehow 'missed' during my initial teacher training days. Equipped with a fresh vision and renewed enthusiasm for teaching, I began my secondary school career in 1996 as an English teacher in a Vocational and Technical school. However, because I was dissatisfied with the fact that what I knew was not enough to help me cope with unmotivated students, I decided to further develop myself professionally by doing a part-time Masters in TESL course in the University of Malaya in 1999. I felt that the extra knowledge gained from doing a post-graduate course was necessary to better equip me for teaching resistant learners in challenging circumstances. The exposure to research methods that I received impacted my professional practice and I began to see myself not just as a teacher but also as a teacher-researcher. Persons and events in the classroom started to have new significance for me as they were viewed with new lenses and an inquiring spirit. Hence, the unique case of Mazlan dialoguing with me in dialogue journal writing was not perceived as an ordinary event but an opportune circumstance for me to interpret this particular phenomenon in the light of scholarship. I believe that the data yielded from this study would provide valuable insights for my emerging understandings about the teaching and learning of ESL. With that I went about collecting data to help me gain further knowledge and discover answers to my research questions.

Following, I will describe the procedures that I used to collect the data for this study.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

In this section I state my rationale for using a qualitative case study approach and also describe the data collection procedures used in this study.

I chose a single case study approach because this approach allows for detailed probing and in-depth study of a specific case to provide interesting and rich data of great usefulness to teachers and researchers (Stake, 1994). For me, this unique case is of intrinsic interest because the contextual and socio-psychological forces that impinged upon this particular student were peculiar and deserved to be studied for themselves. Furthermore, as every case has its own story to tell and to tell it well, I am convinced that readers can learn directly from the thick description of this particular phenomenon. Although individual case studies are not generalisable, cumulatively, case studies can nonetheless lead to useful grand generalisations because of the depth and richness that each specific case presents. Thus this case study can add to the volume of valuable information on ESL pedagogy. Additionally, like Stake (1994), I believe that a case study approach is beneficial as it can offer new vistas for learning, extend our experience, lead to refinement of theory as well as suggest complexities for further research.

Fundamentally, this research is a qualitative case study of a student and teacher dialoguing in writing over an extended period of five months. The data for my study were gathered from multiple sources which included the student-teacher dialogue journal, the teacher's personal journal, semi-structured interviews with the student-participant and other supporting materials including school records and samples of Mazlan and other students' written work. I used multiple data gathering procedures as a means of corroborating information and ensuring triangulation

thin the process. This helped to increase the sophisticated rigour of the data collection procedures (Neuman, 1997) as well as consolidated the validity of the sights. In line with the qualitative nature of my study, I documented real events, conversations held with people, observations of specific behaviours and also information derived from written sources. The different data collection procedures will be discussed below.

4.1 Journals

I used two types of journals in this study: a student-teacher dialogue journal and the teacher's personal journal. The dialogue journal exchanges between Mazlan and me formed the main data source for the study. We began journalling in May 2000 and wrote consistently until September. After September our exchanges were more sporadic because Mazlan was too bogged down with the numerous school-based and district-based examinations that he had to sit for as preparation for the PM examination in November. This being a naturalistic study I did not lay down any rules for the writing as I was more interested to allow Mazlan's needs to drive the writing rather than impose my own agenda on him. Together, we wrote between two to five entries a week. Sometimes, a few entries were written before exchange was made. This was especially so during weekends or holidays when I had more time to write but did not meet each other to exchange the journal. Written in an exercise book, most entries by Mazlan tended to be between two to four pages in length. Likewise, my own entries were of about the same length.

Apart from this dialogue journal I also kept a personal journal where I recorded events or insights which I thought were significant to the study. In

addition, I also described my observations and reflections in it whenever appropriate. My reflections provided a more subjective focus to the process to help improve the notes. The written accounts in my personal journal were mainly based on conversations that I had with other teachers and with Mazlan himself.

In June, Mazlan decided to leave the school hostel and commute from home. As he often took lifts from me after school, this extended my out-of-class contact time with him. Consequently, the informal conversations we had in the car became a much-appreciated source of data for my personal journal.

3.4.2 Interviews

In all, I conducted three informal semi-structured interviews with Mazlan during the course of my study. In the first interview which was held in June 2000, I sought to gain information concerning Mazlan's personal details as well as his educational and social backgrounds (see Appendix A). I carried out a second interview with him at the end of August 2000 (see Appendix B) in order to seek further clarifications concerning some of the things he wrote about. I held my third interview with Mazlan at the end of December 2000 where some questions pertaining to the three research questions for this study were asked (see Appendix C). Other questions were also asked to help fill gaps in the 'picture' as well as to verify things that were unclear to me. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed immediately after the interviews. These data were used to check or supplement the other data sources so as to strengthen the claims made.

3.4.3 Samples of Students' Work and School Records

I also collected samples of students' work and school records to provide a more comprehensive picture of the case study. These included an essay on the topic of a boring character that I had assigned the 5E1 students to write on. As one of Mazlan's classmates wrote about him, this piece of writing was useful in providing a perspective of Mazlan's character from the viewpoint of this classmate (see Appendix F). Additionally, I also added to my data collection some essays by Mazlan (see Appendix G for a sample of his essay) and his classmates, marks and grades from Mazlan's report card and his class teacher's mark sheets to ensure that useful information was not overlooked in the data gathering process.

3.5 Data Analysis

I systematically analysed the data during the data gathering process and upon conclusion of data collection. The data from the student-teacher dialogue journal, teacher's personal journal, semi-structured interviews and other supporting materials were read, re-read, broadly coded and then categorised. These categories of data included the contextual factors, socio-psychological factors and the nature of language use. Data reduction was achieved by selecting categories of information that occurred frequently or were of significance to the three research questions. Then I analysed the data qualitatively to draw a 'thick description' necessary for the interpretation of the data. I used the total pool of data to confirm or supplement the data sourced from the dialogue journal, so as to obtain a more complete understanding of the situation. The information from these multiple data

sources was then interwoven in a descriptive analysis to present a rich, coherent and cogent discussion of the findings.

In this chapter I have discussed the research site, the beginnings of this study, the key participants, the data collection and data analysis procedures of my research. In the next chapter I will proceed to discuss the findings pertaining to my three research questions.