CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS OF ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the methodology with which the research was conducted will be outlined. This will include the research design, the methods by which the researcher set out to find the answers to the research questions posed in Chapter 1, and the tools which lent themselves to the discovery of these answers. The methodology involved is of necessity outlined in detail in order to establish and validate the findings by establishing the credibility of the sources and techniques of data collection. Also, to quote N.Chitravelu:

...ethnography is still in an incipient stage. And, it is important that the field methods used, and problems encountered, be recorded for the benefit of future ethnographers, and for the improvement of ethnography as a heuristic.

(N.Chitravelu, 1997: personal communication)

3.2 The Research Design

Given the area into which the researcher wished to find answers, the most appropriate action on which to embark was one in which an ethnographic approach to the situation could be devised. This would enable the unraveling of data from various sources that would lend itself to scrutiny and eventually the discovery of answers to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. Hence, taking into account the nature of
3.3.1.1 Tape Recording

Prior permission having been obtained, the researcher attempted to introduce a cassette recorder to obtain a clearer and thus, truer representation of all the interlocutors in the classroom. It was hoped that the acoustics of the classroom would lend themselves to recording, and that the interlocutors would not be too intimidated by its presence, thus enabling a faithful recording of all that transpired to be undertaken.

Hence, on the very first day of classroom observation, a cassette recorder was set up on a table in a central position, next to the centre aisle of the class. Despite the size of the room and the number of students in the class, it was hoped that the quality of recording obtained would prove satisfactory.

However, the ‘shut off’ mechanism and the need to reload the machine was disruptive to the lesson. Again, upon review of the recording later, it was found to be of poor quality – much of what was said in the classroom being lost in murmurs. (See also, Appendix 4, Observation Notes, p.160)

Hence, this tool was abandoned, and the researcher had then no other recourse but to depend solely on the notes that were made. Note-taking was aided by the fact that both the Physics and Chemistry classes were mostly about numbers – problems worked out on the board, punctuated by explanations and questions as to what was developing and taking shape on it. It was therefore relatively easy for the researcher to make comprehensive notes of the goings on in the classroom, and to have these converted to observation transcripts at the end of each day, for use later.
In preparation for the study, the researcher had begun to read up on the area under
study in order to better understand the task at hand. Also, a brief outline of the study –
its duration, its aims and methodology, and the questions to which it hoped to find
answers – was prepared. This outline was of value when the researcher began
negotiating entry into the field.

3.2.1.1 Negotiation with the Gatekeepers

The first step towards this journey of exploration and inquiry was taken with the
researcher making an appointment to see the Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of the
ESL programme at Uniten. An American lecturer who had been working in Malaysia
for close to twelve years, she coordinated all the English Language programmes held
at Uniten. This researcher had worked with her for the two years that she taught the
ESL programme at the university, and in that time, a close bond of friendship had
developed between the two.

It was to the Senior English Lecturer that the plans for the study were first broached.
As the study proposed would help identify the reading and writing experience of first-
year Engineering students, she thus acquiesced to speak to the Director of Arts and
Resources on the researcher’s behalf, and if he was agreeable, would set up an
appointment for the researcher to meet with him, and plead her case in person.
3.2.1.1.1 The Director of Arts and Resources

The Director of Arts and Resources is in charge of the language programmes for Uniten, coordinating with the various deans on the language requirements for their respective faculties. It was imperative that the Director be convinced of the value of the study proposed by the researcher for his acquiescence would lend credence when the researcher approached the Dean of the Engineering Faculty.

As with most other persons in top management, the Director's time was limited, and the researcher was grateful for the opportunity to meet with him to discuss the proposed study. Having read the brief notes on the study prepared earlier, he expressed enthusiasm for the proposal, and concurred that it was vital to learn what students really face when they leave the ESL programme and enter their respective faculties. He noted that the students who won places at Uniten were bright, and that the one weakness for many of them was their proficiency in English. The proficiency level at Uniten seemed to exist in a continuum – there were many who were near-native in their proficiency, but there were also those who were very poor. He felt that it would be of value to find out how these weak students coped with the pressure of an all-English medium, and whether they were able to keep up with the reading requirements, and also if they were able to express their knowledge via their writing.

3.2.1.1.2 The Dean of the Faculty of Engineering

Armed with the blessing of the Director of Arts and Resources, the next course of action was for an appointment to be set up with the Dean of the Faculty of
Engineering. It was at the Faculty of Engineering that the study proper would be carried out, and it was therefore imperative that the researcher obtain the Dean’s permission to proceed.

The Dean offered no objections to the undertaking of the study – as long as the students and the lecturers involved were not inconvenienced. He proved very concerned with the welfare of his students, and hoped that the researcher would place no extra burdens on their time and energy.

Albeit a short one, the meeting with the Dean proved to be a very cordial one that ended on a positive note – it was agreed that the study would take place over the next five weeks; that it would involve classroom observation of the first-year, second semester students and their lecturers, and include interviews and the administration of questionnaires. The Dean expressed an interest to be appraised of the progress of the study, and offered the researcher his e-mail address and asked that he be updated periodically on the progress made.

Having obtained the Dean’s approval, it was then possible to meet up with the Provost and the Head of Mathematics and Science – to obtain the names of the lecturers who would be teaching in the coming semester. The researcher was thus able to secure the names of the two lecturers who would be handling the Physics and Chemistry courses for the coming semester. The researcher then made plans to meet up with them to enable the study to be carried out. (See Section 3.3.2, p.50, ‘The Informants’ below)
With the necessary 'permission to carry on' in hand, it was then possible to progress to the 'in-field' stage – that of the study proper.

3.2.2 The In-Field Stage

The in-field stage involved the actual classroom observations of the sample population, the interviewing of student and specialist informants, the administration of the questionnaires, and the examination of relevant documents – all the tools of analysis designed to discover the answers to the research questions posited earlier.

3.2.2.1 The Students

60 first-year Engineering (Mechanical and Electrical) students made up the sample of choice. They represented the total intake for both Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at Uniten, and it was felt that they would be able to facilitate an academic investigation as they learned to access and assimilate the norms of the target discourse community.

The students selected for the study were in their second semester of year 1. They were the sample of choice for the following reasons:

- The first semester had run from February to April; and by the time this researcher was ready to begin work, the semester was long over.
- The two courses to be observed – Chemistry and Physics – were taught by local lecturers in the first semester. In the second semester, they are taught by America
lecturers. As one of the reasons for the study was to see how students coped with the switch from an all-Bahasa Malaysia medium of instruction to an all-English one, this would enable the students to be observed using only English – there would be no opportunity for back-tracking into Bahasa Malaysia, as may have been possible with local lecturers.

- The commencement of the second semester in the faculty coincided with the acceptance of the researcher's proposal for the study – thus proving an ideal time for the beginning of the study proper.

The students who made up the class of first year, second semester were SPM level students. They had an average age of 18 years; were both male and female; and were Malaysians of Malay, Chinese, and Indian descent. They were all from local secondary schools where the medium of instruction for the past 11 years (standards 1 – 6; forms 1 – 5) would have been solely in Bahasa Malaysia.

The sample was made up of a non-homogeneous population in terms of their proficiency in English. There were those that were excellent in English (with scores of around 600 in the TOEFL examination), through to those who just managed a place in the programme by achieving the barest minimum score of 550 in the TOEFL examination. It was then possible to divide the class into two levels of proficiency – good and intermediate (the terms reflecting their scores in the TOEFL exam: intermediate – scores at around 550; good – scores of 600 and more).

Uniten also offers an opportunity to serving staff to pursue their studies at the university. As such, there were also students who were in their late twenties, early
thirties or even older. These students were excluded from the study as it was felt that they would mar the homogeneity of the sample. These students could have come from an English medium; have been on courses in English and have learnt coping strategies, etc. that the rest of the sample had not been exposed to.

3.3 Tools of Analysis

In keeping with the traditions of ethnographic research, four main tools of inquiry were employed to provide the data necessary for evaluation in the study. These included: observation of the sample population in their classrooms; the administration of two questionnaires; interviews with student and specialist informants; and, the examination of relevant documents.

3.3.1 Non-Participant Observation

Observation has proved to be an important tool of analysis for the study. And, it has been utilized as the take-off point from which all the other tools of inquiry in the study have been based. Via observation, the researcher hoped to gain insight into the reading and writing experience of the students in their content-area classroom.

As the researcher was not a member of the discourse community of choice, she took on the role of non-participant observer. And although the classroom was a familiar setting to the researcher, she was not privy to the norms and culture of a content-area classroom: in this case, a Physics or Chemistry class. During the next five weeks,
consisting of over 25 hours of observation, the role of non-participant observer enabled the researcher to discover and evaluate the proceedings in the classroom.

The researcher was thus present at every Physics and Chemistry class during the observation period. These were held everyday, and occurred consecutively. In order to build a clear picture of all classroom phenomena, copious field notes were taken in the researcher's own version of shorthand. At the end of each day, transcriptions of these notes were then written up, while still fresh in the researcher's mind. This enabled the researcher to discover patterns as they emerged. At the same time, the observations noted were immediately triangulated with other methods of inquiry before the drawing of any conclusions and inferences were attempted.

Thus, each day, the researcher would station herself in the classroom before the start of the lesson – usually in one of the seats at the back of the class as the seats nearest to the board were all occupied by the students. The position taken enabled the researcher to observe the students clearly, and enabled the taking of notes discreetly, without intruding into the sensibilities of the students or lecturer. Besides noting what was said in class, also noted were the various paraphernalia brought into class by the students, their expressions (both verbal and facial), and the general atmosphere of the classroom while the lesson was in progress. All these were noted in the endeavour to discover how the students coped in class; specifically, the role of reading and writing in the classroom.
3.3.1.1 Tape Recording

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In order to satisfy the purpose of triangulation to verify data, another tool of ethnographic analysis, the informants, is discussed in the following section.

3.3.2 The Informants

In keeping with the tradition of ethnographic analysis, the researcher as the outsider needed to elicit the views of the real participants of the discourse community, in order to unravel the true picture of the events and information unfolding before her. In this area, there were two groups of participants who contributed to the steadily building body of knowledge of the study: the specialist informants, and, the student informants.

3.3.2.1 The Specialist Informants

The Specialist Informants of this study were the Senior English Lecturer and Coordinator at Uniten, and the two subject lecturers for Physics and Chemistry. It was to them that the researcher turned for answers to the questions that unfolded in the course of the study.

The Senior English Lecturer and Coordinator is a lecturer of some twenty years experience in the field of the Teaching of English as a Second Language. And despite the researcher’s own experience of teaching in Uniten, many hours were spent with her, discussing the nature of the ESL programme, the requirements for the students,
how they were prepared for the TOEFL examination, and generally how the English
language lecturers taught the students.

Both the lecturers for Physics (Specialist Informant 1) and Chemistry (Specialist
Informant 2) were doctorate holders in their respective fields of study, each with more
than 25 years of experience in teaching. Both lecturers were staff sent from IUPUI
(Indiana University, Purdue University at Indianapolis), the twinning university with
Uniten. It was with them, then, that the researcher discussed the students' partici-
pation in class, their expectations of the students for reading and writing, the
ability of the students to cope and generally convey their knowledge in the respective
subjects. It was their perceptions and expectations of the students that formed the
basis of the evaluations derived by the researcher.

It must be noted that all the specialist informants in this study proved to be both
enthusiastic and contributive to the study being conducted. They were themselves
convinced that investigating into the reading and writing needs of the students could
only serve to lessen the gap of knowledge that existed, and aid in the development of
a better environment for both the teaching and learning in the Engineering Faculty. As
such, they were ever willing to talk with the researcher, discussing the various aspects
of the study that needed evaluation.

3.3.2.2 The Student Informants

All 60 student informants were observed during the classroom hours, and asked to
complete the questionnaires (see Section 3.3.3, below). However, for the interviews,
the student informants were selected at random from the group that made up the entire sample under study.

3.3.3 The Questionnaires

In order to elicit the student informants perceptions of the role played by reading and writing in their content-area classroom, questionnaires were administered. This tool was deemed ideal as it would allow for the collection of a variety of data from the sample over a relatively short period of time. Secondly, given the guarantee of anonymity, the researcher believed that it would proffer data of a quality beyond that expected from a face-to-face interview.

To counter the inherent difficulties of questionnaires, it was necessary to take some necessary precautions. Questions were carefully phrased to ensure that students did not give what they felt to be the 'correct' answer; but rather to encourage students to be forthright. Also, it was necessary to constantly bear in mind that the responses of the students were their perceptions, and therefore not indisputable fact. It was thus necessary to triangulate information collated against interviews with the students themselves, the Specialist Informants, or via an examination of the materials that they read and wrote.

Despite these precautions, there were still instances of students misunderstanding what the questions really asked. An example would be the questions, early on in the Long Questionnaire, that called for the students to rate themselves in the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. It was explained to them that what was
needed was how they rated these with regard to their content area studies. Despite this, students rated themselves on their experience in school and in the ESL programme. When this data was cross referenced with interviews, it was brought to light that students felt that these skills pertained to ESL and not to their work in the content classroom.

Hence, it became all the more imperative that this tool be used in tandem with the other tools of inquiry to afford a true picture of the community under investigation. It was initially decided that one long questionnaire would be administered. However, after four days of observation, and as the beginnings of emerging patterns in the classroom behaviour of the students became apparent, the researcher decided that there would be a need for a shorter and less formal questionnaire to be administered as well.

Thus, there were two questionnaires in all:

- the short questionnaire
- the long questionnaire

3.3.3.1 The Short Questionnaire

This questionnaire (see Appendix 2 below, p.158) was administered to gauge the learning habits of the students early in the study. The pattern of behaviour unfolding in the classroom left the researcher wondering how the students actually prepared for each class. Did they read their textbook or any other book before the lesson? If they
read the textbook, how did they assess its level of difficulty? And also, the researcher wanted to gauge the students own perception of how they participated in class.

The short questionnaire was therefore designed to find immediate answers to the above the questions, and to give direction to the analysis of the behaviour being observed by the researcher. It consisted of a set of three main questions, each with one or two sub-parts. Each required the students to provide a yes/no answer, and follow this with an explanation of the reason(s) for their answer. The questions were in English, but students were given the option of answering in either English or Bahasa Malaysia.

The short questionnaire took only about seven minutes for the students to complete. The questions were explained to the students by the researcher, and they were given time to complete the questionnaire during class hours.

The data from the short questionnaire were immediately analyzed. Frequency counts enabled the researcher to better understand the participants in the study. It also helped in the formulation of questions for interviews, and also in the formulation of the questions for the long questionnaire. The data made available via this tool of analysis, enabled the triangulation of data against other tools of analysis used.

3.3.3.2 The Long Questionnaire

This questionnaire (see Appendix 1 below, p.152) comprised a set of 33 questions. They ranged initially from questions on biodata and background, leading on to
questions on the reading and writing practices of the students, and included an assessment of the ESL programme that they had attended prior to gaining entry to the Faculty of Engineering.

Because of its length, and the potentially complex nature of some of the questions, prior arrangement was made with both the Physics and Chemistry lecturers to allocate some time for the researcher to present the questionnaire to the students, and then go through the questionnaire with them, to explain what was needed and to clear any miscomprehension on the part of the students. This having been arranged, the questionnaire was thus presented to the students. Every question was gone over by the researcher to make sure that the students understood what was required of them, and how they needed to respond.

Again, as with the short questionnaire, the long questionnaire was prepared in English. And again, the students were given the option to respond in either English or in Bahasa Malaysia. Due to the length of the document, and foreseeing that it would take some length of time to complete, it was decided to let the students take home the questionnaire and return it, completed, on the following day. All were returned completed, and these were analyzed immediately. Frequency counts again enabled the researcher to gauge students’ perceptions of the various issues under study, and informed the type of questions asked at the interviews.
3.3.4 Interviews

This tool of inquiry was included to enable the researcher to triangulate data obtained via the other tools of inquiry, namely, observation and the questionnaires. It encompassed the researcher interviewing the student informants and the Specialist Informants, the gatekeepers, and others who were able to illumine the researcher on different aspects of the study.

Data from interviews have therefore formed a sizeable portion of the data collected. Besides corroborating information of uncertain clarity in the questionnaire, interviews were also used to elicit information in a more informal manner from all the participants in the study. Respondents were met up with before or after class, in the canteen, anywhere in fact, where the researcher was able to get at the information required for the study.

This tool was deemed essential in the eventual need to triangulate data. What the researcher observed in class needed to be cross-referenced and thus, validated, with either the lecturers or the students to determine whether what was seen was in actuality the phenomena it was thought to be. As has been mentioned earlier, the researcher is not a member of this discourse community and so was not privy to the norms and culture of the community, and needed to be advised of such details.

As was attempted with the ‘observation’ earlier (see p.49), the cassette-tape recorder was introduced to provide a clear recording of the interviews carried out. However, it was not received well by both the student and Specialist Informants. Its introduction
proved to make them uncomfortable, constant reference being made to it, detracting from the discussion at hand. This was especially so with the students, who actually confessed to not being comfortable with having their comments documented on tape. As the response to the recorder proved so negative, the use of this tool was dispensed with again.

Hence, the researcher had to again rely on her self-taught shorthand to serve her through the interviews. Brief notes were recorded during the interview, and these were written up in full later, when time permitted, to represent a faithful record of what had been discussed. Also, many interview with the Specialist Informants were carried out during the class observation periods – when students were assigned a problem to solve, leaving the lecturer free for a few minutes. These short interludes afforded the researcher the opportunity to immediately triangulate data that had just occurred in the classroom. Notes from these interviews were immediately written up, and included within the observation notes. (See Appendix 4, p. 160 – 'Observation Notes'. Interview notes appear in italics.)

3.3.4.1 Interviews with the Specialist Informants

The interviews with the Specialist Informants were carried out on an ad hoc basis – they being interviewed when there was a need to garner their perceptions on various aspects of the study. These were not structured interviews. Rather, they were discussions between the researcher and the informants in an informal and friendly atmosphere. Conversation would flow at a natural pace, questions being asked where appropriate.
This was deemed the best course of action, as the free flow of conversation would enable the informants to explore all avenues relating to the subject under discussion, and not be limited to simply answering the questions asked by the researcher. As noted earlier, notes were made during the interview, and these were expanded later to represent what had transpired.

3.3.4.1.1 The Senior English Lecturer and Coordinator

In the case of the Senior English Lecturer, the researcher made an appointment to see her, and she was interviewed on aspects of the ESL programme, its syllabus, and her perceptions regarding the students and their needs in reading and writing. These were informal discussions, the researcher being a close friend of the informant. Thus the subjects of the interview would be introduced in the natural flow of conversation, pertinent questions being inserted as and when the need to ask them arose.

3.3.4.1.2 Specialist Informants 1 and 2

The scenario was different from the above one with Specialist Informant 1 (Physics) and Specialist Informant 2 (Chemistry). They were not acquaintances of the researcher, their meeting only occurring at the start of the study. However, in the course of the few weeks that the researcher spent at Uniten, they would become good friends, ever willing to talk to the researcher, or work on various aspects of the study that needed clarification or discussion.
As mentioned earlier (See Section 3.3.4, above), much of the data obtained from both the Specialist Informants occurred during the class observations, in the short intervals during teaching. However, interviews were also scheduled in their offices, to discuss other aspects of the study. Issues discussed at these interviews included their perceptions of the textbook assigned to the students, students’ reading and writing behaviour, and also their thoughts on the importance of reading and writing for Science students. Also, during these interviews, both Specialist Informants were asked to evaluate actual examples of work written by the students, the researcher needing to understand how the work was assessed, and the role language played in this assessment.

Each of these interviews lasted for about an hour, and were held in an informal manner, the researcher and the Specialist Informant working across a desk in the latter’s office. As mentioned earlier, the cassette-tape recorder was not used to record the discussions as it made the informants uncomfortable and hesitate to speak freely. The researcher thus had to make notes during the interviews, and transcribe these later.

3.3.4.2 Interviews with the Student Informants

Most of the students in the sample selected would only show up at the university a few minutes before class was scheduled to begin. Once the class was over, they would quickly disappear. Thus it was necessary for the researcher to try to quickly ‘catch’ some of the students before or after class, and arrange to meet with them for a few minutes to discuss the study. In general, most of the students were friendly and
approachable. A few of them had been taught by the researcher the previous year, when they attended the ESL programme at the university. To others, the researcher was a familiar face, having seen her on campus the previous year.

As with all university students, the students at Uniten were always in a hurry – always having somewhere else to rush to. Bearing this in mind, the researcher was careful to keep the interviews relatively short and focused. For instance, a particular discussion would concentrate on the lesson that had occurred a few moments earlier. It was then that the researcher would ask students their perceptions of what had happened in the classroom.

Most interviews were carried out with a few students at a time. It must be noted that the students were generally shy and reluctant to talk, but that they became more vocal in the presence of their peers. The interviews were kept informal and friendly, the researcher attempting to build a rapport with the students as the study progressed.

As such, students were interviewed more than once, but on each occasion would be questioned on different aspects of the study. Also, the researcher would approach students as they waited for class to begin and ask them a few questions. Again, as the weeks went by, and as the researcher became a familiar face to them, some students would approach the researcher and inquire how the study was progressing. The researcher took these opportunities to triangulate data already obtained, and to obtain fresh information from the students to add to the body of data being compiled.
Thus, interviews were carried out throughout the period of study, and would occur whenever the researcher could find some students free for a few minutes. After each encounter, the researcher would quickly note down the salient points discussed, these being carefully detailed at the end of each day.

Finally, as this is a study of the reading and writing experience of the students, it was pertinent to examine the actual material read and written by the students. In the next section, these materials will be discussed.

3.3.5 The Examination of Relevant Documents

The researcher also examined the various documents used by the ‘actors’ in the study. This was done to enable the researcher to piece together the complete picture of what was unfolding in the study. These included: the KBSM syllabus; the syllabus for the ESL programme run at the university; the textbooks assigned for both Chemistry and Physics; and, all aspects of students’ written work.

It would be expected that all students pursuing a degree programme at a university would have recourse to venture into the library to source supplementary reading material for their area of study. However, it must be noted that this was not true at Uniten. This is a new university. Construction is still evident in many areas of the campus and although the library building is ready, it has not yet been fully equipped. The books that are available are out-of-date, and many of the books that are deemed ‘required reading’ are not available yet. This information was made known to the researcher by the students, and this was latter corroborated by the Specialist
Informants. Many titles had been requisitioned, but they had yet to make their appearance in the library.

3.3.5.1 The KBSM English Language Syllabus

This document was examined with the aim of gauging the skills in English that the students were expected to bring with them into the university, upon completing the SPM examination. In it is outlined, among other aspects, the aims, objectives and focus of the syllabus, and this enabled the researcher to cross-reference what exactly the students were meant to be ‘able to do at the end of the secondary school in the four language skills’ (that is, reading, writing, listening and speaking) (KBSM English language Syllabus: p.1)

3.3.5.2 The ESL Programme: Course Syllabus

As has been mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2, p.4), students accepted into Uniten were enrolled in an ESL programme, prior to moving on to their respective faculties. This document then, outlines what would be emphasized during the course, and again enable the researcher to understand how this reflected against what students were actually required to do (in terms of language) in the Engineering Faculty.

3.3.5.3 The Textbooks Assigned

In both the content-area subjects that were observed, there was one textbook that was assigned as required reading – respectively, Chemistry and Physics. The students were
required to equip themselves with a copy of these texts as references were made to
them in class: students being asked to turn to a certain page to look at a diagram, or to
solve particular problems in them. These were also the basic textbooks to which
students were to refer, to follow what was being taught in class.

Both lecturers had told the class that they had to do further reading (that is, apart from
reading the textbook), and that they had books in their offices which the students
could borrow. It was explained that some chapters had not been dealt with as
satisfactorily as would have been liked, and therefore students were encouraged to
look at other sources.

However, it must be noted that for the duration of the study, no student had inquired
about these books, nor asked for permission to borrow them.

The researcher examined both the assigned textbooks, and the books made available
for further reading. Working with the Specialist Informants, the books were discussed
in terms of their layout, content, style and vocabulary — all with the view to gauging
the students’ ability to understand and use these texts.

3.3.5.4 Students’ Written Work

Also examined were all aspects of the writing that the students accomplished during
the course of the study. And, these comprised: the notes that they made during the
course of the class, be these in their note-pads, or in the margins of their textbooks;
their test answers, as well as the answers to quizzes and assignments handed in to the lecturers; and their homework, both group-work and individual work.

While the researcher examined all these materials, it must be noted that their evaluation was left in the hands of the Specialist Informants – as it was important to discover their perceptions of what was appropriate for their classrooms. Special attention was paid to the students’ written answers to questions during examinations. Again, the researcher looked to the Specialist Informants to discover how these were evaluated. Generally, they looked for the ‘content’ of the piece of written work – to gauge the students’ understanding of the topic, and the ability to communicate understanding and knowledge via their answers. Little attention was paid to the need for grammatically correct work, as long as meaning was clear.

Working with both Specialist Informants, the researcher was thus able to formulate an idea of what was deemed ‘good’ and ‘poor’ answers to the content-area specialist.

3.4 Conclusion

In keeping with the tradition of ethnographic analysis, the research design outlined above was employed to enable the researcher to delve into the nether regions of the content-area classroom. Employing the tools of analysis available to the ethnographer, the study was thus able to piece together what really occurred in these classrooms – always one step beyond the ken of the English language teacher.