CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in an intermediate Level 105 class at a private International English Language Centre in Kuala Lumpur. This study of a listening comprehension class extended over a period of one month. As Rost (1991) had recommended, I used action research for the purpose of this study because this methodology allows teachers of the listening component to experiment with various activities in order to get the best results. In this study, I endeavored to identify the problems faced by twelve EFL students in listening comprehension and subsequently employed appropriate techniques and methods to overcome these problems in order to improve and develop their listening comprehension skills.

This chapter discusses the research methodology that was used. It begins by presenting the context in which the study was located. It describes the language centre and its academic programmes and focuses on the listening component of the Certified Intensive English Programme (CIEP). The informants of the study are also described. Data collection and data analysis procedures as well as the stages of the action research cycle which was used are also discussed.

Private International English Language Centre

This private International English Language Center was established in 1990 to cater to the rising demand for reliable and practical English language instruction. The international division of this establishment was established in the United States of America forty years ago. It has been one of the leading organisations in the world
in the field of English language instruction. To date, there are more than ninety centres worldwide including five schools in Malaysia which are located in Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Johor Bahru, Penang and Ipoh. This college has gained the approval of the Home Ministry to recruit and accept international students. Currently, it has a widely diversified base of students from more than thirty countries.

Certified Intensive English Language Programme

This college offers a wide choice of courses which are available on part-time and full-time basis. The Certified Intensive English Programme (CIEP) has been the core programme chosen by the majority of students. It is an intensive programme designed to help students learn English quickly and effectively. This programme consists of ten instructional levels. The beginning level is Level 100 and the highest level is Level 109. Learners can enroll at the beginning of any new session and study for any length of time depending on his or her personal goals. The course length of each level is four weeks. Students get thirty hours of instruction per week.

This course takes an integrated approach, covering five components which are listening, speaking, reading, writing, structure and a special interest class covering areas such as drama, language pronunciation and functional English. The listening and speaking skills are taught in combination in a fifty-minute lesson. Fifty minutes of instruction time is allocated for each of the other components every day. Students get one free period during which they have to use the multi-media laboratory which provides a wide variety of interactive computer assisted language learning software, video and audio-tapes. Student performance in all components except the special interest subject is evaluated. A student's beginning level is determined through placement testing done soon after arrival. A completion certificate is awarded upon
completion of Level 109. Many foreign colleges and universities accept completion of
the CIEP as fulfillment of the English language admission requirement.

The Listening Component of the CIEP

This section describes the approaches used to teach the listening skill under the
CIEP programme, the texts used and the teaching-learning activities carried out.

Teaching Approaches

Five hours of instruction are allocated for listening and speaking classes every
week. Teachers are given the option of teaching listening and speaking separately on
alternate days or the skills could be integrated in one lesson. A teacher can also
choose to use both these approaches. Students’ performance in listening and speaking
is assessed separately twice in a session. In most instances, I was not able to conduct
listening and speaking activities in the same lesson due to limited time. The first
approach was used more often whereby the two components were taught on alternate
days.

Texts Used

The texts used for the listening component are Headway Intermediate
Student’s Book and Interactions Two for the intermediate level. The topics to be
covered in both texts are specified in the session plan prepared by this institution.
Class sets of either texts are distributed during the listening lessons.
Teaching - Learning Activities

The intermediate level marks a change in the materials used for the listening component. In Levels 100 to 104, the length of audio-texts are shorter. The tasks given are simpler too. The kinds of tasks students are required to do include filling in the blanks with short words or phrases, ticking or circling the correct answers, inferring meanings or messages from audio-texts, writing short answers to open-ended questions, matching words or phrases to correct answers and the like.

In the intermediate level, students are required to listen to longer audio-texts, most of which are lecture-based. Most of the tasks require students to take down notes under specific headings given.

The Informants

The focus of this study is on intermediate level students. The intermediate level is also known as the 105 Level. Twelve students from this level were the informants of this study. Out of these twelve students, ten of them were foreigners from four different countries namely Korea, China, Libya and Indonesia. Two of them were Malaysian Chinese. In terms of their language use, English was a foreign language for all these students. Their ages ranged between eighteen to twenty five years. All of them had completed high school. Two of them had completed their tertiary education and were pursuing this course to improve their proficiency of the English language. The rest of them aspired to pursue their studies in local or foreign institutions of learning where the medium of instruction is English.
Data Collection

Throughout the four weeks, data were collected from multiple sources. These included teacher's journal entries, interviews, student questionnaires and samples of students' written work. The following descriptions reveal how relevant data were obtained from sources mentioned and the purposes these data served.

Teacher's Journal Entries

Being a participant observant, I was able to keep a total of eleven journal entries which covered the listening lessons that I taught throughout my research process. The journal entries served as an invaluable source of information which provided an overview of students' attitudes, reactions and performance during their listening - speaking class. It allowed me to keep track of occurrences and situations inside and outside the classroom which affected the students during the listening lesson. My comments or reactions on certain occurrences and subsequent reflections also constituted an important part of the journal recordings. The descriptive accounts of each lesson helped to form a basis for reflection which triggered a search for answers and solutions. This led to new plans and methods to improve students' listening skills.

The journal entries were also a useful tool which helped to triangulate the data gained from student interviews, students' written work and questionnaires.

Interviews

Due to time constraints, only five students were selected to be interviewed. These key informants were interviewed twice. The first interview was carried out after the second listening lesson (see Appendix 1 for interview questions). This
interview played a very important role in unravelling the situation in the first two listening lessons. Their responses shed light on students' perception on my teaching and of the strategies undertaken and it also gave an idea of students' expectations and needs. This interview was much needed because it allowed me to further probe students' perceptions and explore into areas which were not accessible through my observation of lessons.

The second interview was carried out after the eighth listening lesson. (see Appendix 2 for interview questions). This interview was meant mainly to determine the students' progress up to then, the effectiveness of the plans undertaken, problems they still encountered and suggestions for new methods.

Data obtained from both interviews helped to delineate the problem areas in listening lessons and thus formed the basis for future planning to plan further.

**Samples of Students' Written Work**

The small number of students in my class allowed me to constantly check on my students' written work. During listening lessons, I made it a point to check their work each time the tape was being played, during intervals in between each round of playing and also after they had completed their tasks. I examined their work mainly to see the notes they had taken and the nature of the language errors they had made. Notes made by students were discussed orally to gauge how good the students were at producing the relevant information they heard in oral form. In the first few lessons, students were asked to write their notes on any piece of paper as worksheets were not distributed. From the fifth lesson onwards, proper worksheets were distributed to students to write their notes. I collected these worksheets at the end of every lesson.
in order to analyse them. Comparisons of worksheets from different lessons served as an indication of how much progress or improvement the students had made.

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire comprising seventeen items was administered on the first day of the final week of the session (see 3 Appendix for questionnaire). The questionnaire was distributed to all twelve informants of the study. The main aim of the questionnaire was to obtain relevant information from all the informants especially those who were not chosen as key informants to be interviewed. In other words, it was meant to give all informants the opportunity to express their problems and opinions.

The questionnaire focused on eliciting information mainly about factors which contributed to students' problems in listening to audio-texts, comprehending them and using this information to perform language tasks. A substantial amount of data had been gathered from other sources by the time the questionnaire was administered. The information gathered from this instrument enabled me to probe into areas that I had failed to see earlier and to draw conclusions about students' problems and the strategies undertaken. Besides, the information gathered was also a good means of triangulating data received from the other sources.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis was conducted on data obtained from journals, interview responses, samples of students' written work and responses from questionnaire. The following description focuses on how data from the various sources were analysed.
Analysis of Journal Entries

The journal entries were coded and analysed for any recurring patterns or trends. This analysis was ongoing throughout the study. Patterns or trends concerning four different aspects namely problem areas, teaching activities, learning activities and materials used formed my focus. The data from these entries were analysed basically for evidence of any positive as well as negative perceptions from the students towards the above aspects. The outcomes of teaching-learning strategies used were analysed as well.

Analysis of Interview Responses

The responses of the key informants from both interviews were basically analysed in the same way. Data from interviews were closely examined and coded. Emerging patterns were then noted and this served as a basis for comparison of the findings obtained through the other data sources in the study. The responses served the purpose of discovering the students' inability to produce relevant information drawn from audio-texts at different stages of the session. The responses from the first interview were studied mainly for reasons why the students failed to take down sufficient notes and why they failed to produce relevant or correct points of content in the first two lessons.

The data from the second interview had to be compared with the data obtained from the first interview to determine how much of improvement the students had made in two weeks. The analysis also focused on determining any new or persisting problems pertaining to the teaching-learning activities and materials used. The effectiveness of the strategies undertaken up to then was another chief concern.
Analysis of Students’ Written Work

Students’ work was analysed for the amount of notes they were able to take each time the tape was played and for the different kinds of mistakes made in each lesson. The analysis of the worksheets was done against the respective audio-texts in order to study the effects of different content-matter and speakers on the students. Students’ worksheets were compared with their worksheets from the previous lessons to check for persisting problems and improvements. Analysis of students’ work provided relevant information which helped to confirm and illuminate the responses obtained from journal entries and interviews.

Analysis of Responses from Questionnaire

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed to confirm the problems in the process of teaching and learning listening. Among the areas encompassed in the analysis were the comprehension of audio-texts, the taking down of notes and the selection of relevant information from audio-texts. The responses were also analysed for students’ opinions on the strategies undertaken.

Action Research

This exploratory study uses the methodology of action research. Action research is increasingly being used in educational settings. McNiff (1988) states, ‘The literature of action research is growing rapidly and as it grows, so do the number of definitions and characterisations’ (p.11). Stated below are a few definitions of action research drawn from the existing literature of action research.

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants such as teachers in social as well as educational situations in order to improve their own
social or educational practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Ebbutt (1985) defines action research as a systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions.

Hopkins (1985) describes action research as a framework which enables participants to recognize the existence of shortcomings in their educational activities and to adopt some initial stance in regard to the problem, formulate a plan, carry out an intervention, evaluate the outcomes and develop further strategies in an iterative fashion. Similarly, in this study, I endeavoured to identify the shortcomings in my methods of teaching listening comprehension, formulate appropriate strategies, implement them, evaluate the outcomes and develop further strategies to improve my students’ listening comprehension skills.

**Stages of Action Research**

Lewin (1946) describes action research as a spiral of steps. Each step in this spiral has four stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Fleming (1997) agrees that action research is a spiral of steps or in other words it is cyclical. He feels that it is this cyclical nature which gives it its special strengths and the use of cycles allows action research to be both flexible and rigorous. In *The Action Research Planner* designed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1990b), the self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning is recommended as the basis for a problem-solving manoeuvre.

This study is also cyclical. It is characteristic of McNiff's (1988) action-reflection plan which consists of a spiral of identifying a problem, imagining a
situation, implementing the solution, observing the effects, evaluating the outcomes, modifying actions in the light of evaluation and re-planning for the next action.

There are seven cycles in this action research study. Each cycle comprises four stages namely identifying the problem, intervention which is made up of planning and implementation of strategy as well as assessment of strategy and reflection.

**Identifying the Problem**

In order to identify the problems that my students were facing with regards to listening comprehension, I adopted a number of strategies. During the listening lessons, I observed students' attitudes, responses and reactions towards the listening activities. This helped to uncover some of the factors which contributed to students' problems in listening comprehension. I checked students' work to further examine the areas of difficulty especially in producing information drawn from audio-texts to perform the given tasks. Interviews were of great help in shedding light on grey areas and also in confirming most of the problems identified earlier. It gave an idea of students' needs and expectations and uncovered some of the hidden problems. The questionnaire proved to be a useful tool of triangulating data obtained from all the other sources of data collection.

**Intervention**

In order to overcome the problems faced, intervention was necessary at different stages of this study. Intervention involved planning a strategy and subsequently implementing it. A number of teaching–learning strategies were implemented to better facilitate students' ability to perform listening tasks.
The findings from the different sources of data collection were reflected upon to
determine the nature of problems faced by the students. Subsequently, an appropriate
strategy was planned to rectify the problem identified. Steps to be undertaken under
each strategy were carefully planned.

Prior to implementing a new strategy, students' were informed about it and
its purpose was made clear as well. On occasions where two problems needed to be
rectified simultaneously, two-pronged strategies were implemented. During the
implementation of a new strategy, I observed students' responses and reactions and
monitored the outcomes through the various data collection procedures outlined earlier.

Assessment and Reflection of Plan Undertaken

The effect of each strategy implemented was studied through the data obtained
from the journal entries, samples of students' written work, interview responses and
questionnaire. In assessing each strategy, the amount of positive and negative changes
in students' performance upon the implementation of the respective strategy were
analysed. If there was an improvement in students' performance, the strategy was
analysed to determine what aspect contributed to the positive change and vice versa.

I reflected upon the results yielded from the assessment of each strategy. This
was then used as a basis for the planning of the next strategy to be implemented in
order to overcome any new or persisting problems.