CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology adopted in the present study on e-mail messages sent by teenagers in the Friendster website (www.friendster.com) for recreational purposes. This includes a discussion of the research premise, instrumentation, selection of subjects, research procedure, analysis of data and pilot test.

3.1 Research Premise

Research works done by the various researchers reviewed in Chapter 2 have helped to shape the following research premises of this study:

a. authentic data is obtained from a natural setting where e-mail users from different backgrounds have the liberty to express themselves without any constraints or intrusion from the researcher;
b. linguistic data collected is in the form of whole texts for only complete texts display a fair number of instances of CSs used by e-mailers naturally;
c. language is a social phenomenon, therefore linguistic features in a discourse should be examined in relation to the social context in which they occur.

3.2 Instrumentation

Two sets of instruments, namely, interviews one and two (see Questions in Appendix 1 and 2), and a questionnaire (Appendix 3) were used in this study.

The questionnaire was employed to elicit participants' views on the use of various communicative strategies when composing e-mail messages.

3.2.1 Interview One and Two

Semi-structured interviews were expected to be an important source of data for a study on the diverse reasons for CSs adoption. They (Interviews 1 and 2) were carried out on separate occasions with all the 12 participants so that personal information and other information pertaining to the participants' experience and knowledge on e-mail writing could be gathered (refer to Appendix 1 and 2).

The main purpose for conducting the first interview which was carried out prior to the collection of e-mail messages, was to ensure that the participants fulfill the criteria of participant (refer to 3.3 Selection of Participant). It is also to get their consent and approval to use their e-mail messages for this research.

Interview Two was carried out after the e-mail messages had been reviewed by the researcher to elicit the participants' view on the use of CSs, the problems encountered as a result of employing various CSs and the reasons for their choice of CSs. The researcher's doubts concerning CSs and structures used in the e-mail messages were also addressed to

avoid misinterpretation of data. It was anticipated that the disparate information gathered from the second interview could not be garnered by using questionnaires. As Reinard (1994) states "unstructured interviews" grant the participants the opportunity to give comments on the general issues without restrictions from highly detailed questions and this helped the researcher to discover and follow up on new matters raised.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

Reinard (1994) states that questionnaires are survey forms in which individuals respond to written items, asking people to report their understanding of things, often including their own behaviour.

The questionnaire designed for this study is made up of 2 sections, that is, Section A and B (refer to Appendix 3).

Section A requires the participants to provide information about their background such as age, gender and SPM English language grade.

Section B attempts to elicit information about the participants' experience as e-mail users (Questions 4 & 5) as well as reasons for using various CSs when writing e-mails. The experience of the e-mail user that is whether he or she is an experienced user or newbie/novice does affect the employment of language conventions or CSs when writing an e-mail message. Thus, Question 6 is a vital part of the questionnaire to ascertain the experience and exposure of the participant in the study. In order to check the participant's understanding on the various CSs and their ability to use them, the CSs listed in Questions 7

and 14 are not limited to those chosen for this study (refer to the 4 main categories of CSs in Table 2.4 Taxonomy for Present Study in 2.3.3).

3.3 Selection of Participants

To select the participants, the researcher made verbal announcements about this study to her 25 students in the classroom. Out of the 25, only the first 6 male and 6 female students who were willing to contribute their e-mail messages for this study were selected. There is a need to select equal representatives from both genders as gender was one of the aspects being investigated. An informed consent was obtained from all the 12 selected participants (refer to http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf Association of Internet Researchers (AOIRA)). This is vitally important as the objectives, purpose and procedures of this study was explained clearly to the participants. They were also given a consent form (refer to Appendix 5) to fill.

In her study, Frizler (1995) recruited her subjects through the Internet by using 3 approaches, that is,

i) making announcement to EFL/ESL instructors on numerous discussion lists
ii) directly inviting students to participate via *schMOOse university* (discussion lists).
iii) directly communicating with EFL/ESL students on the EFL/ESL student's discussion list via email.

However for the present study, the participants were selected through 'real', not 'virtual', communication. The 6 males and 6 females who were willing to assist her in the downloading of their e-mail messages with www.friendster.com were identified, and then interviews were conducted individually to make sure they fulfilled the criteria. In Frizler's

study, not all the samples selected fulfilled the said criteria. In the present study, however, all the selected participants met the criteria prior to the data collection.

The participants for this study needed to fulfill some important criteria. Each participant:

a. has an e-mail account with www.friendster.com (also known as message box),
b. is an active e-mail user with www.friendster.com
c. is an experienced e-mail user for at least one year
d. has obtained a A1 – B3 grade in English Language at SPM level,
e. is within the age range of 17 and 19,
f. is a secondary school student in the Klang Valley, and
g. speaks English Language daily to his or her friends, teachers and family members (although he/she may speaks his/her mother tongue or other languages).

The 12 participants who fulfilled all the criteria were then given a CD or diskette each to download their e-mail messages verbatim.

3.4 The Corpus

The main body of data which forms the foundation on which the study is constructed consists of text documents in the form of e-mail messages. The corpus comprises 123 e-mail messages retrieved from the participants' respective mailbox with www.friendster.com and downloaded (with permission) onto CD or diskette. The objective of writing these e-mail messages was for recreational purpose. Out of the 123 messages, 65 were from female participants and 58 from male participants. Yli-Jokipii (1994) argues that a corpus for a quantitative analysis should be large enough to allow the researcher to achieve adequate

conclusions but not larger than what is required for its purpose. She elaborates by giving examples of corpora of business letters collected for quantitative analysis, which ranged from 72 letters to 800 letters. The number of e-mail messages in the corpus was considered large enough for the purpose of the study because the CSs studied were being repeated.

The data collected covered e-mail communication of the 12 participants in their interactions over a period of 11 months, that is, from February 2006 to December 2006. This gave the participants a wide selection of e-mail messages to contribute to form the corpus. Some of the e-mails contain personal and confidential information which the participants were unwilling to share with the researcher or expose to public reading. Thus, the corpus can be said to be representative of the range of e-mail communication for recreational purposes as all the e-mail messages were composed without time constraint and prior knowledge that the messages would be used for research purpose. The messages under investigation also represent "data from authentic interactions … available for analysis without the presence of the researcher biasing the data collection process" (Herring, 2002). The participants also completed informed consent forms, which explained that their e-mails would be stored for analysis and that no personal information would be revealed (see Appendix 5). Permission was also obtained for quoting messages or parts of messages in the analysis of data. Messages containing sensitive or confidential information would not used in the analysis (no such message was downloaded). For confidentiality purpose, the identity, e-mail address, and pictures of both the senders and recipients were changed or blotted out. To refer to the e-mail messages collected, please refer to Appendix 4.

3.5 Analysis of Data

3.5.1 Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis is useful to describe the different communicative strategies employed by participants, the reasons for employing them as well as the influence of gender on the choice of communicative strategies. A naturalistic, qualitative approach is more common for studies which investigate how people act and react when using CMC (e-mail in this study) in social settings and when communication is not task-related (Cheseboro and Bonsall, 1989; Walther, 1992; Parks and Roberts, 1998; Mann and Stewart, 2000).

The 123 e-mail messages collected from the 12 participants were analysed according to the modified taxonomy of CSs provided in Chapter 2 (see 2.1.4 Communicative Strategies Used in CMC).

3.5.2 Quantitative analysis

The purpose of the quantitative analysis was to obtain frequency counts on the occurrence of the 14 types of CSs in the 123 e-mails and the participants' reasons for using them (based on the responses to Questions 7, 8, 9 and 10 in the questionnaire). Frequency counts were carried out twice, that is for the overall occurrence of CSs and the occurrences of CSs in male and female e-mail messages to allow a comparison to be made. As qualitative research has been criticized for the lack of objectivity in its procedures and also the lack of representativeness of the data collected, hence, quantitative measures give perspective to qualitative assessments by giving concrete statistics to support the interpretive analysis.

In analyzing the data, the researcher has adopted the suggestion of Brown and Yule (1983) to describe regularities in the linguistic realisations used by individuals to convey meanings and intentions in a discourse. To identify such "regularities" in the e-mail messages, the researcher has based her description on the "frequency with which a particular linguistic feature occurs" (Brown & Yule, 1983:22) in her data. In the present study, it refers to the frequency of CSs used in the e-mail discourse. In addition, as postulated by Brown and Yule (1983), the frequency of occurrence need not be as high as 90% to qualify as a regularity since the discourse analyst is largely concerned with the level of frequency that is significant in "perceptual terms" (Brown & Yule, 1983). Thus, linguistic features which are examined and described in the study may not necessarily be those that have a frequency of occurrence that is as high as 90%.

Due to the modest size of the corpus investigated in the study, a detailed statistical analysis was not conducted. However, a frequency count of the occurrence of CSs in the messages has been conducted to support the findings.

Based on the research questions stated in Chapter 1, the e-mail messages were examined for these 3 areas:

i) the types of CSs used,

ii) the reasons for the choice of CSs employed in the e-mail messages, and

iii) the influence of gender on the use of CSs in the e-mail messages.

The study examines the data for the frequency of CSs which were categorized and listed in the taxonomy in Chapter 2 (see 2.3.3 Taxonomy of Communicative Strategies Used in E-mail in Current Study).

3.6 Research Procedure

Based on the above research premise, the following research procedures were carried out for the purpose of this study.

The procedure for collecting the data started with the researcher first identifying a specific website (that is, www.friendster.com) which is frequented by all kinds of young people of various backgrounds and the main purpose of sending e-mails is for recreation or socialising where formalities is not a concern. The researcher also gained access by subscribing to the same website as one of the participants from January 2007 until present time to have real life online socialising experience, to gain better understanding of the mechanism of www.friendster.com , and to explore the possibility of conducting a study out of it.

To select the sample, the researcher made verbal announcements on this study to her 25 students in the classroom. The first 6 males and 6 females who were willing to assist her in the downloading of their e-mail messages with www.friendster.com were identified. Then, the first interview was conducted with them individually to ensure they fulfilled the criteria stated under Selection of Participants.

A total of 19 e-mail messages downloaded with permission from one male (9 messages) and one female (10 messages) participants was used for the pilot test. A second interview was then carried out to ascertain the meanings of some CSs as well as to investigate the reasons for employing the various CSs in the messages besides clarifying doubts regarding the message content in instances where simplified structures were found. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were applied in the pilot study. A frequency count was conducted to

reveal the types and frequencies of CSs, the participants' reasons for using them in the e-mails and to identify the gender which used more CSs.

3.7 Pilot Test

A pilot test was then carried out with the aim of examining the objectivity of the research questions, and the feasibility and accuracy of the method used for the study.

The interview questions (Interviews 1 and 2) and the questionnaire were developed through pilot testing with 2 participants (M1 and F1), who were representatives of the teenage e-mail users.

The 2 participants were chosen out of the 12 teenage students who were briefed on the research. Interview 1 was conducted (refer to Questions for Interview 1 in Appendix 1) to ensure they fulfilled the criteria set for participants and also to gather their background information. The participant's background information would help the researcher to understand better the e-mail messages when analyzing them. Each participant was given a diskette or CD to download at least 10 of their e-mail messages from their mailbox with www.friendster.com., and a total of 19 e-mail messages were collected.

The second interview (refer to Questions for Interview 2 in Appendix 1) was carried out after the researcher had reviewed all the messages. Clarification on the meanings of CSs, the content of messages and the reasons for using the different CSs sought was a part of this interview. Therefore, misinterpretation of the data could be avoided. A questionnaire was

administered to gather personal information about the participants, and their experience in composing e-mail messages at the same time.

Based on the research questions stated, the data collected was then analysed to determine the frequency of use of the various types of CSs listed in the taxonomy, the participants' reasons for employing all the CSs and the occurrence of each sub-strategy for each gender. Since the total number of e-mail messages collected for the pilot study was just 19, a detailed statistical analysis was not conducted. It was also not necessary to use computer software for quantitative analysis of the data. Instead, the e-mail messages were manually tabulated using simple frequency counts. The modified taxonomy served as the guide for the analysis.

The findings of the pilot study revealed that the two participants adopted all the 4 categories of CSs with *orthography* being the most frequently used. *Paralinguistics* and *graphics* ranked second. Sub-strategies such as *spaced letters*, *asterisk markers* for actions and *image emoticons* or *smileys* were not used at all by both participants. *Vocabulary* strategy came third in preference. Low frequencies of occurrence were expected for the following two strategies, that is, *syntactic features*, and *discourse and text* as they were analysed based on groups of phrases or sentences unlike the 3 preceding strategies. Basically, brevity and economy of keystrokes were the key influencing factors for the employment of the manifold CSs in e-mail writing. The findings led to some minor modifications in the taxonomy used. Finally, a comparison in the use of CSs was made between the male and female participants in order to ascertain the influence of gender on the use of CSs (RQ 3). Evidently, there was no stark contrast in the frequency of use of CSs by both male and female e-mail users. (A

paper on this analysis was presented by Chan & Rajeswary (2007) at the Conference of the Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics.)

3.8 Summary

In brief, the research methodology involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the data which comprised 123 e-mail texts, responses to Interviews 1 and 2, and the questionnaire. A pilot test was conducted to examine the feasibility of the research questions, the methods of data collection and the data analysis. The corpus is examined for types of CSs employed, communicative purposes for CSs employed and the use of CSs by the two genders (male and female). A simple frequency count of the occurrences of CSs in the e-mail messages was carried out and tabulated to support the findings. The results of this investigation are reported in the next chapter.