

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.0 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter One, the limitation of the study is by qualitative and ethnographic research. Although there are many other methods to do the research work, still the descriptive approach (qualitative and ethnographic approaches) is preferable in analyzing the data for the instability of the subjects in the online situation, because there is no one whose language could be duplicated, or who could be followed up after data collection on the Internet. This makes some of the quantitative instruments, as questionnaire and interview, difficult to work for the data analysis. Chatroom language has its specific characteristics. One can hardly tell the age, sex, or race of the users on the web because they just talk behind the cyber screens with their nicknames. So most of the research work can only be carried out through observation, description, and analysis. There are some online talk researches done in qualitative approaches (Turkle, 1995 and Neuge, 2003). From the outset it is clear in all CMC studies that methodology in cyberspace is different from that conducted in any other environment. Sherry Turkle writes for instance in relation to her own ethnographic work into online communication:

“Virtual reality poses a new methodological challenge for the researcher: what to make of on-line interviews and indeed, whether and how to use them.”

(Turkle, 1995:34)

### 3.1 Qualitative Research

In this study, qualitative research is used in analyzing the data. This is not only because the relation between researcher and research changes online, but because problems of validity and verification of results occur, since it is impossible to guarantee identity or access. It is also impossible to replicate the data as finding the same people in the same chatroom discussing the same topic would be extremely rare. The quantitative research criteria focus on credibility, audit-ability, fittingness, and conformability. However, these features can hardly be matched to the criteria of an online chat research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) studies the issue raised in relation to qualitative research and how the researcher evaluates such studies. They assume that methodological rigor of online qualitative research is difficult to carry on due to its diversity and lack of consensus about rules to which it should conform and whether it is comparable to quantitative research. The view that there is nothing special about qualitative research and that it should be evaluated by the same criteria as quantitative studies with validity, reliability and generalizability changes with cyber-ethnology due to advances in technology. For example, in this study the transcription of conversations 'captured' from chatrooms are by cutting and pasting the chat turn-takings. However, it is impossible to recognize and follow up the subjects as the chatters hide themselves behind their screen-names (nicknames).

Qualitative research is about other people studied in their own social setting and

understood in terms of the meanings those people themselves bringing to their situation (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994: 2). As such, adopting qualitative research to study the norms and conventions of chatroom language is of rationality and objectivity, as the qualitative research is analytical rather than enumerative. Chatrooms as communities are 'momentarily' social settings created not to last further than the immediate 'talk'. There are underlying paradigms to doing qualitative research by Guba and Lincoln (1994), as positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. Following their lead much qualitative research today is construed as interpretive science within a constructivist paradigm.

### **3.2 Ethnographic Research**

The proposal of this analysis is created by the theoretical framework of pragmatics and methodological 'focus points' within the study. An ethnographic approach to researching text-based language will be taken as it provides a method for learning about, and learning how to talk about, chatrooms cultures, by placing the researcher in the research. I am part of the research that I am investigating, as I need to enter a chatroom in order to 'capture' the dialogue. So I present myself and become a participant, albeit a 'lurker' (silent one).

Most research conducted online uses ethnography as a methodology (see Hamman, 1996, 1998, 1999). Ethnography is one of the approaches within anthropology that emerged in the late nineteenth century (Stocking, 1983). Ethnography at its simplest is

just writing about cultures. Online cultures are discussed throughout this dissertation. A linguistic observer in a cyber-ethnography field studies the chatroom as a cultural field and makes records (copy turn-takings), and interprets some aspects of the taken-for-granted culture of the people in the chatroom.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

There is a diverse possibility of online text collection and collation, and several text data mining software packages are available with varying methods to collect and collate chatroom text. Some technology can maintain a permanent record of exchanges (dialogues) that occur in computer-mediated communication; data that is recorded automatically can be stored for future analysis (Gates and McDaniel, 1999; Mena, 1999) making computer saved text easier to scan for patterns than verbal conversation which CA (Conversational Analysis) researchers using tape-recording study (FTF conversations need to record for later analysis, but online chat can be saved by certain software inside the computer).

#### **3.3.1 Limitation to the Data Collection**

There are problems with doing online research because there is the trouble of verification. With the volume of communication in email, newsgroups, and chatrooms, manual techniques of information management are difficult to cope with. It has been estimated that over hundreds of million instant messages are exchanged each day on the World Wide Web. The difficulty with any software for CMC is identifying who is

speaking. The speaker is able to hide behind his or her screen-name. The researcher can only observe social and semantic relationships from topic to topic. How to classify these disordered and irregular raw materials is a tough job for the data mining.

### **3.3.2 Solutions to Data Mining**

Data mining is a pattern recognition technique that does not require consent of the individual. Likewise there is no method to obtain who the user is other than requesting an email account, password and username. Data mining can assist the researcher in discovering previously unknown patterns about the word usage and topics or threads in the chatroom. 1) With online data collection, the sample is not representative of any particular population. (Kehoe & Pitkow, 1996; Bradley, 1999). This is dealt with by choosing particular chatrooms that would attract a certain type of people. For example, three chatrooms, Language Salon (Chinese in China), Alamak Chat # SG (Chinese in Singapore), and Alamak Chat # 1 (Australians in Australia) are chosen. By selecting specific sites, particular speech language usage is sought to use for the data analysis. 2) It is difficult to control the study environment because web users use unlimited types of software, hardware and Internet connections. For example, the emoticons used by different chatters are various in terms of the software they downloaded. This is solved by picking up the similar website (Alamak Chat) with chatters from different cultural backgrounds as they, sometimes, would enter into the chatroom of others. 3) Unraveling threads as topics or change in topics is one challenge of identifying what a user is

saying. This is approached by using several methods, for example, to separate all the text by a particular user, and then to find out what he or she is talking in a referential context.

### **3.3.3 Instruments**

There are two instruments that are used for data analysis in this dissertation: 1) observation (carried out in the course of data collection); 2) transcription (cutting and pasting chat-log, which is done like tape recording for data in a FTF talk); the raw data are collected by copying the chat-log in each chatroom, and then saving them to the relevant file. The data collected range from twenty minute sessions to more than one-hour sessions that have more than one thousand turn-takings of chatroom 'talks'.

As the investigator of qualitative and ethnographic research, I work as a "lurker" among the chatters using myself as an instrument (a participating observer), attending to my own cultural assumption as well as to the data. In seeking to achieve imaginative insights into the respondents' social world the investigator is expected to be flexible and reflexive and yet somewhat manufacture distance (McCracken, 1988). For the sake of the language analysis from pragmatic perspectives, the data will be considered as a whole to interpret chatroom language.