

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the overall approach and rationale, the site and subjects, the research design, data collection methods, my role as researcher and data analysis strategy. I adopted a qualitative approach with an emphasis on observing, describing, interpreting and understanding how the teacher trainees who were undergoing the B.Ed. (TESL) programme at the University of Malaya (UM), tried to implement techniques for teaching ESL writing. I started with an investigation of techniques used by the teacher trainees to teach ESL writing prior to starting the programme. I next described the approaches and techniques advocated by the lecturer and then examined the lessons of five selected teacher trainees during simulated teaching and teaching practice.

The Site and the Subjects

The site was at UM and the subjects (participants) were five teacher trainees from a cohort of 56 teacher trainees who were undergoing the four-semester B.Ed. (TESL) programme conducted by UM's Faculty of Education. The Teaching of Reading and Writing course was taught in the second semester of the programme for the 1997/98 session. The course was be taught by two lecturers, one dealing with the reading component and the other, the writing component. There were 106 teacher trainees at that time in their second semester and they had been divided at random into two groups. One group had 50 teacher trainees and the other 56. In the first half of the semester (seven weeks) the group of 50 did the writing component of the course while the group of 56 did

the reading component of the course. In the second half of the semester (also seven weeks) it was the other way around. The group of 56 teacher trainees began the teaching of writing component of the course on 5 January 1998. Five ex-teachers from this group were selected as subjects of this study. Ex-teachers were needed for this study because the focus of this study was on whether, and if so how, the teacher trainees were changing their past techniques in teaching ESL writing.

The teaching of writing component of the course was taught for 3 hours per week for seven weeks. After they completed this course, the teacher trainees did a course on simulated teaching for 14 weeks in their third semester. Although the simulated teaching course covered all four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), the teacher trainees had to focus on one of these skills for presentation during simulated teaching. One of the criteria for selecting the five teacher trainees as participants was that they would focus on writing skills in their presentation during simulated teaching. The simulated teaching course was conducted in tutorial sessions. The teacher trainees were divided into tutorial groups and different lecturers from the Faculty of Education were their mentors. Each mentor had his/her own mentee group. After the simulated teaching course the teacher trainees in each mentee group were sent to schools for teaching practice.

Teaching practice was conducted for 6 weeks in their fourth semester. The mentors (from the simulated teaching course) followed through with their mentees during teaching practice. The structure of the B.Ed. (TESL) programme in relation to the teaching of ESL writing is shown in Figure 1.

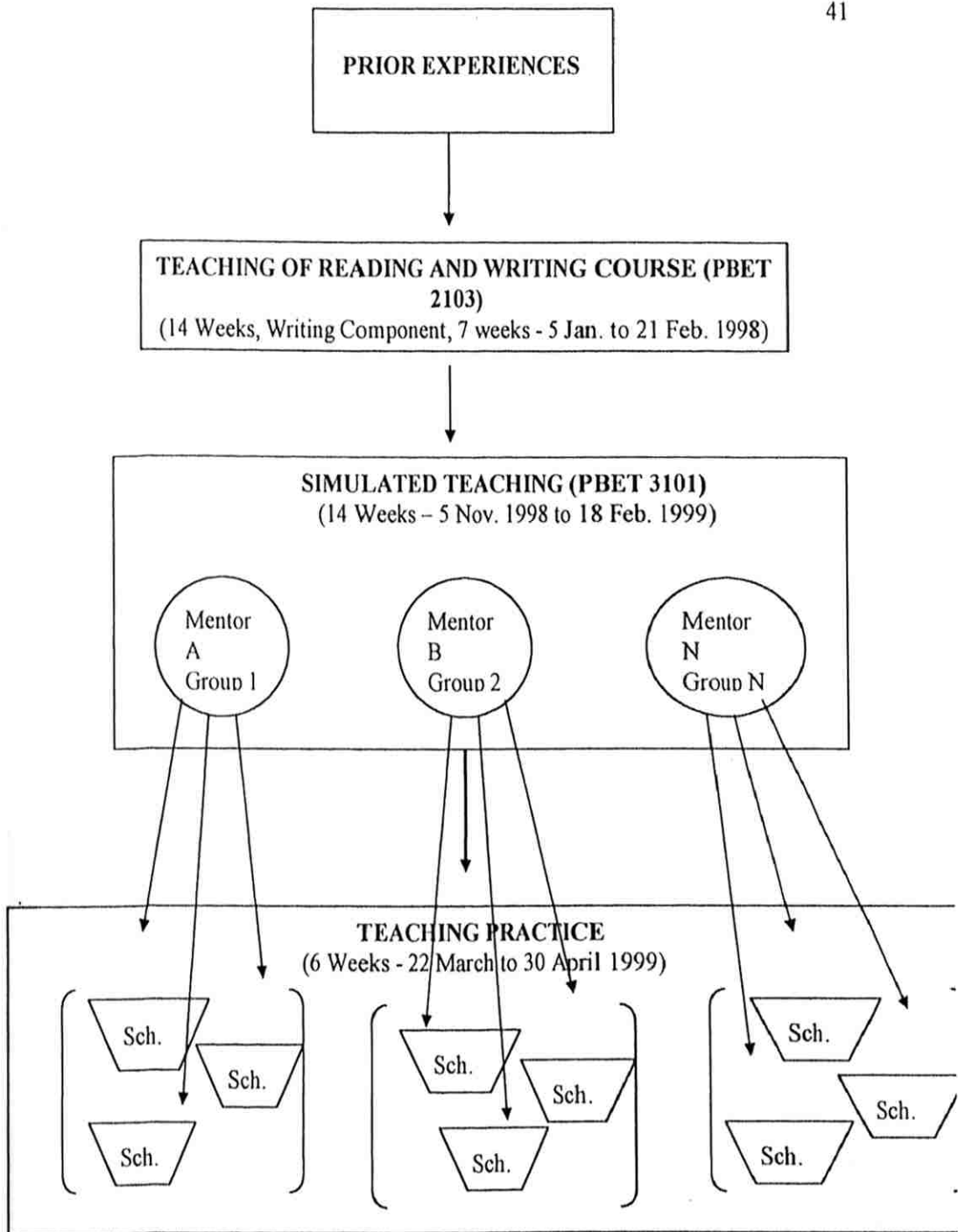


Figure 1. Structure of B.Ed. (TESL) Programme in Relation to Teaching ESL Writing

The Research Design

The different stages of this research, data collection methods and rationale are shown in the figure below.

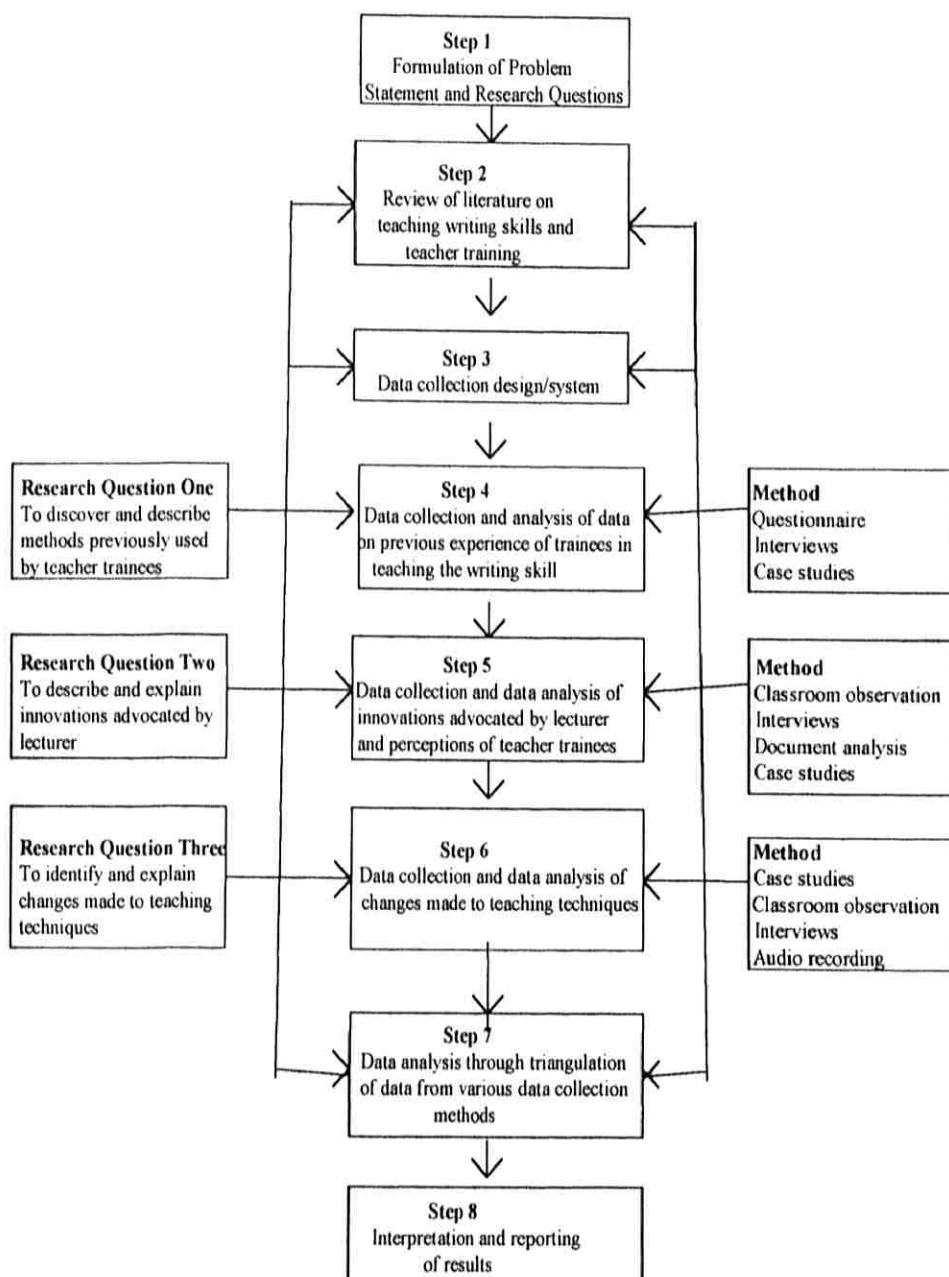


Figure 2. Research Design

Rather than being rigidly linear, it was necessary at times to return to earlier stages of the research design to seek elaboration and clarification. For example, during the analysis of changes taking place (step 6), it was necessary to reconsider both data gathered about the previous experience of the teacher trainees (step 4) and data about approaches and techniques advocated by the lecturer (step 5). Qualitative research dictates the need to retain a certain degree of design flexibility to reconsider decisions in the light of new information and insights. (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989).

The research schedule is provided in Appendix A.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered through the use of a questionnaire, case studies, interviews, classroom observation, audio recording, and document analysis. I remained truthful but vague in the portrayal of the research purpose to participants. I did not tell the five teacher trainees that I was specifically looking out for changes they were making in their teaching techniques. I maintained a journal in which I recorded and reflected on issues concerning my role in the site, in relation to the other participants.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire that was used is provided in Appendix B. The aim of the questionnaire was to gather information about the background of the teacher trainees and to ascertain approaches and techniques these teacher trainees used in the teaching of the writing skills prior to enrolling in the B.Ed. (TESL) programme. The information from the questionnaire was used to select the five teacher trainees as participants of this study.

Section A.

This section of the questionnaire comprised structured questions aimed at obtaining information about the background of all the 56 teacher trainees. Questions asked here concerned their academic qualifications and their past ESL teaching experiences.

Section B.

This section listed 18 statements, which the teacher trainees were asked to rate according to a given scale, concerning their beliefs about the teaching of ESL writing. The aim here was to ascertain the approach they followed before enrolling in the B.Ed. (TESL) programme.

Section C.

This section consisted of two essay-type questions requiring the respondents to describe their past techniques and the problems they faced in teaching ESL writing. The aim was not only to obtain more details about the past techniques of the teacher trainees, but also to look at the ability of the teacher trainees in providing detailed descriptions. This information helped me to select eight teacher trainees (the focus was later on only five) to be called for the initial interviews. The eight teacher trainees, were selected on the basis of

- a) their willingness to cooperate with me;
- b) their willingness to teach writing during simulated teaching;
- c) their ability to provide details;

d) having differing perspectives to the teaching of ESL writing skills (for variety).

I gave out the questionnaire to 51 (5 absent) teacher trainees before the first lecture (prior arrangements made with the lecturer) of the course and I waited in the classroom to answer any queries about the questionnaire and to ensure that all questionnaires were completed and returned. As expected, the teacher trainees completed the questionnaire within an hour.

Case Studies

Since I was interested in describing how the teacher trainees were changing their previous techniques, case studies were used to illustrate difficulties and transformations. From the cohort of 56 teacher trainees, five teacher trainees were selected as participants. I initially selected eight teacher trainees after going through the responses to the questionnaire from all 51 teacher trainees. After the initial interviews with the eight teacher trainees, five were chosen. The basis for selecting the five was same as that used for selecting the eight (see previous page). Five was considered a manageable number after taking into consideration the duration of the program and the number of interviews and observations that could be done.

Interviews

Interviews were first conducted after the responses to the questionnaire had been analysed. Seven interviews during the teaching of writing course (once a week), seven interviews during simulated teaching (once every two weeks) and four interviews during teaching practice were conducted with each of the five selected teacher trainees.

Interviews after analysis of questionnaire.

Initially, I conducted interviews with eight selected teacher trainees after the responses to the questionnaire had been analysed. At this stage, information gathered from the questionnaire was used as the basis for the interviews. However, a guide (shown in Appendix C) which I had prepared earlier was helpful. During the interview, I sought clarification and elaboration of the interviewee's responses to the questionnaire. The aim here was to elicit further details of the interviewee's previous approaches and techniques in teaching the writing skills and also to ascertain the interviewee's willingness to cooperate with me. Five teacher trainees were then selected from the eight to be the focal participants of this research.

Interviews during the teaching of writing course.

Seven informal, conversational interviews with each of the five teacher trainees were held, once every week, over the period of the teaching of writing course (seven weeks). The aim was to determine the reactions, responses and understanding of the five teacher trainees concerning approaches and techniques advocated by the lecturer and their willingness or unwillingness to use them in their own classrooms. A guide used for conducting these interviews during the Teaching of Writing course is given in Appendix D.

Interviews with the lecturer.

Seven informal, conversational interviews were conducted with the lecturer during the Teaching of Writing course (7 weeks). Fieldnotes taken during observation of lectures were discussed with the lecturer to seek clarification and elaboration. Fieldnotes taken during interviews with the five teacher trainees were also discussed with the lecturer to obtain his opinion about techniques that the five teacher trainees found complicated or difficult to use. I also sought details concerning the theoretical orientation of approaches and techniques being advocated by the lecturer and the theoretical orientation of reference material being recommended to the teacher trainees.

Another interview with the lecturer was held at the end of teaching practice to discuss the problems faced by the five teacher trainees. A guide I used for interviews with the lecturer is given in Appendix E.

Interviews during simulated teaching.

After each microteaching session involving the five teacher trainees, I interviewed each of them to determine why they selected a particular approach and technique, how they prepared themselves for the presentation, how close they stuck to the technique and what changes they were planning to make in the future use of the approach and technique. Interviews at this time focussed on the influence of the mentor on the teacher trainees' construction of pedagogy. Interviews further investigated how peer teaching took place and how the teacher trainees reacted and responded to the suggestions of the mentor. A guide I used for conducting interviews during simulated teaching is given in Appendix F.

Interviews during teaching practice.

Four interviews were held with each of the five teacher trainees during teaching practice, after I conducted classroom observations of these five teacher trainees. As themes arose and issues became clearer, I prepared a range of questions in advance as well as the order for asking them. A guide for doing this is provided in Appendix G. This acted as a checklist to ensure that each interview covered the same information. However, I adapted the questions to the particular teacher trainee being interviewed and retained a relatively natural conversational interaction. If questions resulted in an ambiguous response I probed for a better understanding.

Audio recordings (with prior permission) were made while I jotted down important points. These audio recordings were used during the writing up of fieldnotes to aid in providing details of the encounter, which I might not have noted.

Classroom Observation

Allwright (1988) defines observations as "...a procedure for keeping a record of classroom events in such a way that it can later be studied, typically either for teacher training or for research purposes" (p. xvi). I did observations during lectures, during simulated teaching, and during teaching practice.

Observations during lectures.

Observations were first done during lectures on the teaching of the writing. All lectures were observed and the entire lecture period was used for each observation. Observations were initially unstructured to provide clarity and detail in describing the

approaches and techniques being advocated by the lecturer. I kept in mind that the important goal here was to record as thoroughly as possible what, why and how innovations were being advocated. A guide for observations during lectures is given in Appendix H. My own reflective remarks followed the descriptions but these were recorded separately (see data analysis, p. 39).

Observations during simulated teaching.

Observations were made during all microteaching sessions involving the five teacher trainees when they were teaching the writing skills. These observations focussed on attempts made by the five selected teacher trainees to use ideas obtained during lectures. During these observations I noted the effect of comments made by the mentor on the individual teacher trainee's performance, the changes taking place in techniques and how learning from peers took place.

Observations during teaching practice.

Four observations of each of the five selected teacher trainees were made when they had the writing skill as the main skill to be taught. At first I wanted to video record at least one lesson of each teacher but then changed my mind because the four of the five teacher trainees did not want me to video record them. This was not surprising because video recordings of lessons were shown during their simulated teaching and there were a lot of criticisms from the class of these lessons. Moreover, the five teacher trainees were under stress during teaching practice and I did not want to add to their stress. So I only audio recorded the lessons. The focus at this time was on the extent, manner and

rationale of the implementation of ideas given by the lecturer and mentor and on how much of previous techniques were being retained or transformed. A checklist I used for classroom observations is given in Appendix I.

Although it was my intention of to remain a non-participant and an unobtrusive observer in the classroom, the five teacher trainees, at times, asked me to help out with small chores (e.g., checking their lesson plans for grammatical errors, photostatting material) or for some advice with a particular problem.

Document Analysis

The documents that were studied are the B.Ed. (TESL) programme handbook, syllabuses, reference books suggested, materials and handouts used by the lecturer, mentor and the five teacher trainees, lecture notes taken down by teacher trainees and lesson plans devised by the five teacher trainees.

Data Analysis

As the data was mainly in the form of descriptions and narration, data was analysed by looking for patterns and categories within the data. The recordings of data during interviews and observations were in the form of fieldnotes and these fieldnotes were the basic, raw data scribbled in a notebook. I maintained one notebook for each of the five teacher trainees selected for the case studies. Each notebook had separate sections to differentiate data obtained from the various methods described earlier. I followed the recommendation of Miles and Huberman (1984) that the scribbled notes be converted to “write-ups” soon after a particular contact because a write-up would help

me recall content not included in the scribbled notes. It was kept in mind that the important goal here was to record as thoroughly as possible what, why and how innovations advocated by the lecturer and mentors were used by the teacher trainees.

After a particular field contact was completed and the fieldnotes fully written up, I prepared a “contact summary sheet” in which information about the site, the contact and date were recorded. As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1984), a summary of the main themes or issues, the research question being addressed, my own reflective remarks and unanswered questions for the next contact were recorded here. A sample of the contact summary sheet is given in Appendix J.

Data gathered through the various methods mentioned earlier were analysed according to the research question being answered.

Research Question One

The first research question was to find out the approaches and techniques of the five teacher trainees in the teaching of the writing skills prior to enrolling in the programme. Data from the questionnaire and from the interviews were scrutinised to identify and categorise common techniques, recurrent patterns and unusual techniques. I attempted to discover the theoretical underpinnings of approaches used in their classrooms. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) define approaches as “different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learned” (p. 20). However, the five teacher trainees were only able to provide details of techniques (kinds of classroom activity) they had used in their writing lessons and were unable to relate these to any particular approach.

Research Question Two

The second research question investigated the approaches and techniques being advocated by the lecturer at UM. Data obtained through case studies, observations, interviews and documents were analysed by categorising approaches and techniques being advocated by the lecturer. Data were analysed by categorising patterns and themes of particular innovations and the teacher trainees' perceptions of these innovations. Comments made by the five teacher trainees were analysed to show similarities, agreement and differences. Confusion and contradictory statements concerning the approaches and techniques advocated by the lecturer were further investigated to obtain reasons or to seek the source of confusion.

Research Question Three

The final research question was to discover how the trainees were appropriating new ideas into their teaching techniques. Data gathered through observations, audio recordings and interviews were analysed by identifying and describing changes that were taking place and how instruction given by the lecturer and mentors was reflected or realised in the approaches and techniques used by the five teacher trainees. The lecturer, mentors and the teacher trainees were, at times, encouraged to comment or elaborate on my fieldnotes to clarify issues. The teacher trainees' reactions to the various teaching techniques and how and why they were making changes or not making changes were described and explained. Unusual and unpredicted aspects of changes were identified and described. Fieldnotes taken during interviews with the five teacher trainees and fieldnotes

taken during interviews with the lecturer and mentor were compared to look for both agreement and contradictions. Follow up interviews were held to discuss contradictions and confusion.

Triangulation

In analysing the data for the three research questions, triangulation of information obtained was a strategy that I used for strengthening the validity of the research findings. According to Freeman (1998) the term “triangulation” was borrowed from land surveying and in research it means, “... including multiple sources of information or points of view on the phenomenon or question you are investigating” (p. 96). Four types of triangulation were used in this research: data triangulation, triangulation in time and location, theory triangulation and methods triangulation. Data triangulation, as described by Freeman, makes use of several sources of data. In this research, data was obtained from the five teachers, their lecturer, their mentors and documents. Triangulation in time and location, according to Freeman (1998), means collecting the same forms of data and using the same methods over a given time period and in various locations. In this research, data were collected from the same participants over three semesters and in different locations (the university and the three schools). Theory triangulation, according to Bailey (2001), occurs when various theories are brought to bear in a study (the theories of Markee, Kennedy and Fullan are the major theories used in this study, see p. 5). Methods triangulation, also according to Bailey (2001), entails the use of multiple methods to collect data. In this study, a questionnaire, observations, audio recording, interviews and scrutiny of documents were used.

Freeman (1998) explains that triangulation builds stability and confidence in how data is interpreted. It illuminates problems and raises new questions. It is recursive and not linear. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) give the example that data obtained from observation can be confirmed by the use of audio tapes and interviews. Under the various themes given in chapters four, five, six and seven, analysis through triangulation of this nature was used. At times, data from two sources were used for triangulation, for example in chapter four, data from a questionnaire and from interviews were used and at times, data from three, four or more sources were used, as in chapter seven under the various themes. In chapter eight, the concluding chapter, data from the three research questions, collected over the three semesters, were triangulated together with theory to come up with the conclusions and recommendations.