CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology takes into account the tenets of the previous discussion to provide a macro description of the role of the executive secretary before analyzing the genres of speech event and speech acts. This includes two distinctive stages. The first is the pilot study to obtain preliminary information. The second is an outcome of the first stage facilitating the criteria for selection of subjects for the ethnographic study of communication.

3.1 PILOT STUDY

3.1.1 Details of Respondents

The pilot study was the preliminary stage of investigation by interviews, using an interview schedule to guide the interviews (See Appendix 2). Twelve executive secretaries were identified based on their willingness to participate. Some of these respondents were initially selected based on the varying years of service since their graduation. Some others were through personal contacts.

Details on respondents are as follows :

1. Twelve were graduates of either the Diploma in Executive Secretaryship started in 1986 at the Institute of Technology MARA or graduates of the Diploma in Stenography prior to 1986.

2. There was a range of years of service from two years to twenty years.

3. All were employed in the private sector. (Public sector executive secretaries who were approached were reluctant to participate).

4. The basic job designations were not identical in all cases. They varied, being called executive secretary, confidential secretary or just secretary. There have also been changes in job designations.

5. They mainly serve one boss who is the chief executive officer (CEO), or the managing director (MD) or more than one boss if they are managers or heads of departments (HOD).

6. All respondents were female as there is a preponderance of females in the secretarial profession (Morais 1994:9).

3.1.2 Research Instrument

The research instrument used was an interview schedule. The aim of the interview schedule was to obtain first hand information from executive secretaries regarding their role and functions, the kind of communication they are involved in, the network of interactions and the level of decision making (See Appendix 3).

The interview schedule (See Appendix 2) is broadly classified into the following categories :

1. Background Information
2. Duties and responsibilities
    - routine tasks

- work based on instruction
- independent work

3. Forms of Communication

- teamwork	)	
	)	
- telephone	)	Oral
	)	
- face-to-face	)	

4. Networking

- Fascimile	)	
	)	Written
- Computer-related tasks	)	(Impact of Technology)
	)	
- E-mail	)	

5. Language
6. Company Details

The information obtained from the interviews is provided in Appendix 3.

3.2 ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

3.2.1 Criteria for Selection of Respondents

Four respondents from the pilot survey were identified as subjects for an ethnographic study of communication to analyse genres. Criteria for selection were based on the following :

Willingness to participate

Number of years of experience

Type of company

3.2.1.1 Willingness to participate

This is an important aspect of the research methodology because without their full cooperation, participant observation would not have been possible. Each of them was identified through personal contacts by family members and close friends. In spite of personal contacts there were several who were very unwilling and the reasons given were similar. They are as follows :

- Not comfortable with the idea of being watched.
- Too busy with their job functions where the presence of a researcher for extended periods would be disruptive.
- Unwilling to bring the matter up to the boss to seek his approval.

Willingness to participate included the boss as well in the sense of seeking his approval and allowing for a face-to-face interview. In the four cases identified, all the bosses were co-operative and very supportive of the research for their own reasons. In general, their interest in the study seemed to stem from the need to upgrade the quality of the incoming secretaries who did not seem to match the expectations of the bosses. As a result, they seemed to retain the secretaries who, by their potential growth and self-improvement, are preferred to the young executive secretaries seeking employment. In other instances, the executive secretaries may have held the position for several years in the same company and worked for different bosses.

Their common concern for the need to upgrade the quality of executive secretaries to meet the immediate demands of the job in the rapidly changing technology based business environment appears to be their reason for the willingness to participate in this study.

3.2.1.2 Number of Years of Experience

Selection was also based on the number of years of service. They varied from two to twenty two years of service. Three of them began their secretarial career after a basic secretarial training programme. The most junior has a Diploma in Executive Secretaryship. Although she does not have many years of experience, she has an advantage over the very senior executive secretaries. This is by virtue of a more professionally tailored training programme in executive secretaryship introduced in the School of Secretarial Science, Institute of Technology MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat) in 1986. It is relevant to consider the varying years of service as their individual experiences provide insights about the role of the executive secretary in the last two decades.

3.2.1.3 Type of Company

The 'willingness to participate' was a primary concern in the criteria for selection. With regard to the size of the company, they included the largest with about 20,000 employees and the smallest with less than twenty employees taking into account consultancies as well.

Of the four companies two are service oriented and two are product oriented companies. Of the service type, both are local with multinational contacts. One of them is a public utility company and the other is a training outfit.

One product company is a multinational company with the headquarters in the Netherlands. The second product company is local but with foreign and local partnership.

3.2.2 Method for Data Collection

Triangulation is a research methodology used essentially to collect and compare different perspectives on a situation. The need for triangulation arises out of the question of how an ethnographic study collects data that is valid. As has been the practice in ethnographic research, this study incorporates two approaches to triangulation proposed by Denzin (1970), namely, investigative triangulation and methodological triangulation. (Stubbs. 1983; Silverman 1985; Doheny-Farina and Odell, 1985).

3.2.2.1 Investigative Triangulation

The first approach is investigative triangulation which relies on multiple sources of data of people identified. This is by in depth interviews of the subjects and informants. The specialist informants include the bosses of the executive secretaries who are subjects of the study and the specialist informants who have very deep knowledge on the role of the executive secretary.

These in depth interviews of the bosses and their executive secretaries were conducted as a first step before setting out on participant observation. During the period of participant observation, more informal interviews were conducted from time to time to obtain clarity, elaboration or explanation of particular situations (See Appendix 6).

The aim of the in depth interview of the executive secretaries who are the subjects of the study centred on the role of the executive secretary with a focus on the details of the job functions. Areas of inquiry included the following :

- Personal details on background and experience
- Duties and Responsibilities
- Time allocated for various tasks
- Interactions
- Communication

The in depth interview of the bosses as specialist informants provided first hand information of the role of executive secretaries from an experiential point of view. These bosses were the chief executive officers and managing directors of the companies identified for the study. The interview was to gather information in the following areas about executive secretaries:

Expectations

Duties and Responsibilities

The Role in the Company

The Personality

Communication

Training

A formal written request was made before fixing appointments to interview the bosses and the executive secretaries. As time was a factor to consider, both bosses and executive secretaries were not always interviewed on the same day or at the same time.

The specialist informants are both from multinational companies. One of them has had over twenty years of experience in human resource development and has therefore very sound and reliable knowledge on the role of the executive secretaries. The other specialist informant, also with over twenty years of service in the same company, works very closely with the executive secretary in company matters, particularly in the area of public relations and company entertainment and cultural events. As in the case of the bosses, the areas of investigation are the same; and with the additional inquiry on the impact of technology on the role of executive secretaries. (See Appendices for summary of data collected).

3.2.2.2 Methodological triangulation

The methodological triangulation that Doheny-Farina and Odell (1985:509) draw on refers to Blumer's varying procedures in collecting data from a variety of sources. The approach in this study is based on various methods of eliciting data. These include direct observation, audio recordings of telephone interaction and face-to-face interaction, observational notes, fieldwork diary, open-ended interviews and where available, annual reports of the company. Each of these will be discussed separately.

The method of triangulation is to address the issue of the validity of the data collected to obtain an objective empirical basis for the conclusions. As Doheny-Farina and Odell acknowledge, triangulation provides the findings which show the

> **"...emerging patterns by increasing the possibility of finding negative cases and countering the bias of any one approach. Thus triangulation fosters more rigorous research". (Doheny-Farina and Odell 1985:510)**

An important consideration is for the researcher to take note that in ethnographic research, it is the informant who is most important and the researcher is left with the task to uncover the information.

3.2.3 Participant Observation

Although there are three particular roles a researcher can assume, namely being the 'complete observer' where

> 'the researcher enters the setting, observes and records activity but does not interact with the participant at all';

'participant-as-observer' where

> 'the researcher(s) interacts with participants only to establish (herself) as an acceptable presence to the participants and to clarify the data"

or as an 'insider' or as a 'complete participant'.

> **"Researcher(s) establishes (herself) not only as researcher but also as participant(s). (Doheny-Farina & Odell, 1985:514)**

The role suitable for this study is 'participant-as-observer' for two main reasons.

First, there is an imperative need to be *'acceptable'* in the *'natural setting'*. The role of the executive secretary dictates a high degree of confidentiality by the very nature of her position in the company. She is by her very function, the *'closest'* to the boss who is the CEO or the MD of the company and who is a person who knows the most about company matters and the personal matters of the boss. In that context, the presence of a researcher at the site for extended periods is considered as an intrusion.

However, of the subjects identified a certain degree of confidence and trust was established by the initial contacts made and through the recommendations of either family or friends. This followed an appointment for a face-to-face interview where an effort was made to explain to the executive secretary and to the boss, the nature of the study and the aims of the study. At the end of each preliminary face-to-face encounter, the researcher's presence was seen as *'acceptable'* and non-threatening. However, there were limits set in some companies on the length of the visits.

Second, there is a need to clarify the data from time to time and the need to find out from the participants the purpose of talk interaction. This interaction between researcher and participant provides additional insights on the participant's construct of meaning. Simultaneously,these exchanges help the participant to understand the work of the researcher and to develop trust. The subject is likely to find a quiet observer rather disturbing and would not be able to establish a rapport with the researcher.

The visits that followed on-site observations revealed that the subjects carried on with their duties and responsibilities with little indication of being affected by the presence of the researcher. This is perhaps due to the fact that the executive secretary is always very busy, in fact too busy to be bothered by a researcher whom she has already accepted. In that sense the problem of an *'observer-effect'* did not arise.

3.2.4 Audio-Recordings

The face-to-face audio recordings were made with prior consent of the participants. They were all in the *'natural setting'* mostly in the office of the executive secretary and sometimes out of the office setting. These audio-recordings were made during the period of observation.

Although it is argued that audio-recordings have an effect on the participants and that there could be a problem of a tape-effected speech, there was no visible evidence of such a problem in this study. This could be for two reasons. First, as already mentioned, they are too busy getting through the day's work. Second, it may be due to their acceptance of the presence of a researcher whom they trust.

3.2.5 Field Work

3.2.5.1 Physical Setting

Field work involved arriving on site by appointment and remaining on site for an extended period. This varied from a minimum of two hours to a maximum of four hours at a time. Entering the site for the first time was in the sense of a novice in an unfamiliar setting. Observations of the physical setting were made with descriptions in relation to the office of the boss and the executive secretary. They included access to other different physical settings like the conference rooms, visitors' lounge or the offices of heads of departments, or senior managers. These descriptions and observation of the participants in the communication network provided a better understanding of the social organization of the company.

3.2.5.2 Times of Observation

Times of observation were different at each visit. This was done to observe the range of interactions and activities that take place at different times in a day. The time of observation was, for some visits, from 11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. At other times it would be from 8.00 a.m. to 10.00 a.m., 2.00 p.m. to 4.00 p.m., or 3.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. When more days for visits were allowed, the researcher was able to repeat the observations at the respective times. Where visits were restricted this was not possible. Instead, information was obtained through casual conversation. However, to note patterns and regularities, the researcher investigated the data and the related genres collectively rather than confining attention to individual companies. It did not seem worthwhile to stay on the premises for the entire day for several reasons.

Long hours of participant observation would result in unmanageable collection of data of audio recordings and field notes without leaving time to reflect and to evaluate the data collected.

The sampling of times as recommended by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) was also applied in this study. It includes overlapping time such as 8.00 a.m. to 10.00 a.m. followed by 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. the following day. This helps to provide adequate representation of what goes on, on a daily basis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:48). Organizing time in this way enables the observation of routine duties and wide range of responsibilities of the executive secretary.

3.2.5.3 Periods of Data Collection

The pilot study, the interviews and the participant observation were carried out over a period of six months. All the appointments made were with the approval of the subjects identified and their convenience was taken into account in the schedule of data gathering.

In some instances, data collection meant having to accompany the executive secretary to other locations like hotels, where she had to organize seminars or training workshops. In these instances, overnight stay on location was necessary to enable the observation of the different roles and responsibilities of the executive secretary out of the office premises.

3.2.5.4 Field Notes

The three types of field notes referred to by Doheny-Farina and Odell (1985) have been considered in this study. These are observational, theoretical and methodology notes. The observational notes (ON) are recorded exactly as they are seen and heard and not as constructs of meaning or interpretations. These notes reflect patterns which are analyzed for interpretations of meaning with reference to the context and make up the theoretical notes (TN). The methodological notes (MN) are those arising out of a need for more inquiry into a particular activity or event. An example of the field notes is given below :

2.00 p.m. in the Office

ON The executive secretary receives a phone call (car phone) from the boss.

TN It seems like he continues to conduct his affairs even if he is not in the office.

MN To find out if this is common practice.

(See Appendix 6. Two samples of about forty such field notes taken).

This kind of systematic note-taking is not possible while on the site. Instead, following the visit, time is spent on recognizing the kind of notes taken as ON, TN, or MN. Information drawn from the notes provides insights into the organizational culture and the social organization of the company.

A particular feature of data collection was that it was not possible to plan ahead. Instead, the researcher had to rely on whatever data was available during the period of observation. Each situation was unique in itself depending on the variables of time, people, and context. These were recorded with a time sequence making entries in the note-book as in a diary.

3.2.6 Tape Transcriptions

The complexity of tape transcriptions cannot be underestimated. These include false starts, hesitations, incomplete sentences, self-corrections, repetitions or overlapping utterances. They do not pose a problem in spoken interaction which, in spite of being incoherent and defective, can be understood through interpretation.

The tape transcriptions that will be taken into account are the genre-specific institutional talk *'which provide the fundamental framework of social interaction and social institutions'* (Boden and Zimmerman 1991:3) in relation to the role of the executive secretary.

One of the limitations in tape transcriptions is that it is not possible to obtain accuracy in transcriptions. In spite of repeated listening, some words or phrases seem inaudible. Nevertheless, since the data in the speech event is contextualised, the interpretation of meaning may not be adversely affected.

3.2.7 Documents

The documents collected were mainly annual reports, information on the organizational structure and some samples of written communication by the executive secretary. The company documents provide general information on company operations and on the various levels of management.

The next chapter provides the ethnographic descriptions relevant to this study.