CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This research adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. In view of the random and unpredictable manner in which conversational implicatures surface in conversation, a qualitative approach would seem the most viable. Since this phenomenon is rooted in philosophical and pragmatic notions about conversation, the analysis of data should remain at best, descriptive and open. The units for analysis (i.e. the utterances), will be assessed in terms of contexts, goals and intentions and these are often abstract and even intuitive in nature.

3.1 Determining the Mode of Data Collection

Data collection via recording

Initially, the tape recording method of data collection was tried out. The microphone was switched on and left in the room where the children were. However, this did not really serve the purpose of the study well. Long stretches of conversation were transcribed with no part containing the phenomenon looked for. Conversational implicatures (CI) do not occur at regular intervals. Therefore data cannot be collected as and when the observer wishes. The spontaneity of such moments can only be observed and recorded as they occur. Hence, to rely on transcriptions for samples of CI would be very impractical as it would mean leaving the tape recorder for hours and days on end and transcribing every bit of
data. Too much time and effort would be spent in the latter and there is no guarantee that it would yield the results desired. Thus, a field study type of research design would seem more efficient. Emerson (1983) defines field study as the study of people acting in the natural courses of their daily lives. The fieldworker ventures into the world of others in order to learn first hand about how they live, how they talk and behave, and what captivates and distresses them. A field study is also an active enquiry approach where the researcher interacts 'hands on' with the subjects and their verbal products (utterances).

3.2 Observational Methods of Data Collection

Observational methods of data collection are common in field research and they are most frequently employed by social science researchers. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) point out that observation methods are advantageous in two ways. It is first of all direct. It allows researchers to study and record behaviour and in this case, verbal behaviour as it occurs. This means that the investigator is able to collect data firsthand and be able to note the context in which a particular behaviour occurs.

This method also promotes the investigation of behaviour in natural settings. Data collected by observation describes the observed phenomenon as it occurs in its natural settings. Subjects are less likely to behave in an uncharacteristic manner since they are not aware when they are being observed for research purposes. They are accustomed to the observer and thus do not regard him/her to be an
intruder. In addition, the relationship between the subject and his environment is not altered or controlled in observational studies.

Lund and Duchan (1990) in their research into children's language also favoured the assessment of language in naturalistic settings. This form of data collection promotes spontaneity on the part of the participants. The situations are less likely to be contrived as the researcher will have little room to manipulate the conversations or interactions to yield the results desired.

3.3 Participation Observation

Observation methods of data collection vary in approach according to the phenomenon observed. For the purpose of this study, the participant observation method of data collection was deemed most suitable. Participation observation involves watching some behavioural phenomenon unfold and reporting about it. (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996) The researcher or the observer is in the situation, patiently watching and listening for the phenomenon to occur.

The participant observation method of data collection serves this study well because the phenomenon studied is a 'fleeting' one. As Weick (1968) says, this approach is particularly helpful when a researcher seeks to capture some fleeting moment that happens only rarely or could never be recreated in an experimental investigation.
3.4 The Role of the Researcher and Observer

The participant observation method of data collection best suited this study in view of the spontaneity of moments in which implicatures were generated. In fact the role assumed by the observer here is that of the complete participant because she shares in the lives of the observed. This method of data collection also permits the researcher to be in a sense "in many places at one time". She need not be the sole observer. She can assign the task to others. In this study, therefore, there are many investigators. A sizable sampling can, therefore, be done between six to eight weeks. It allows the observer to collect data in a non-intrusive way. The observer does not interrupt what the children are doing as she moves in and out of their circle. Neither does she ask questions aimed at eliciting a response. Nothing is pre-planned and there is no need to contrive situations to increase chances of the manifestation of this phenomenon. The children will in no way suspect that they are being watched and hence, will not adapt their behaviour accordingly. Since they are not among strangers (as sometimes is in the case of a more formal investigation), the children will carry on with their verbal behaviour without any inhibition. The observer, too, carries on with the daily activities. All she has to do is to have pen and paper at hand to ensure the faithful recording of relevant data. The participant observer approach allows flexibility with regard to the role and approach of the observer. Data collection becomes a fluid process where there is no need for concealment of identity and the observer can move in and out of a conversation as and when she wishes. At times she is a contributing interlocutor. At other times, as a silent listener, she is just present in a
non-intrusive way. Whatever the nature of the role, the observer has the advantage of being in full knowledge of the context. In fact, the observer can help in providing preliminary analysis of a particular segment of conversation. This is a requirement when they write down their CI samples.

Directness is the main advantage of this observation method of data collection because it allows the researcher/observer to study language behaviour as it occurs. Data collection is done first hand and the investigator is able to describe the observed phenomenon as it occurs in naturalistic settings.

3.5 Choice of Observers

The observers or research assistants in this study must fulfill the criteria of being either a parent or guardian to the subjects observed. They are people with whom the children are in constant contact and with whom they feel at ease to be 'just themselves'. Since the conversational implicatures looked for in this study are those which occur in naturalistic settings, the subjects and the observers should also be familiar with each other. In addition, the children observed would not view the observers as intruders or strangers and therefore there will not be the tendency to put on an act or be conscious of their being assessed. Children do behave rather differently in the presence of strangers or in formal settings. They may either speak to impress or become withdrawn and shy.

The observers in this study are people who have experience in the field of teaching. They are familiar with concepts of inferences and implied meanings, as
these are areas which they frequently draw their student’s attention to in the language classroom. Hence, it was not a difficult task to explain to them the meaning of conversational implicature. A brief description of conversational implicature and some samples were given to them to be read. One important criteria for their selection was that they had to be a parent of or guardian to a child aged 3 years to 7 years. This relationship is crucial because of the naturalistic settings demanded by this study. Only a parent or guardian will have the opportunity to be in contact with their children or charges frequent enough to identify instances of conversational implicature at work.

In the light of the small sampling involved in this study, the selection of observers was limited to colleagues who are teachers and educators. Being teachers, these research assistants are also mothers/guardians who do not baby-talk their children or charges and thus the cognitive and linguistic development of their charges has followed a natural course and has not been in any way hindered. The subjects studied can then be expected to have acquired a linguistic competence that is normal for their age group. (See Chapter 3.6 for description of subjects.)

3.6 Subjects of Study

The study will have a sample size of 10 subjects (A to K). They are young children aged between three to seven. The way data is collected allows them to be in naturalistic settings. They are thoroughly familiar with external elements of contexts. They know the other speaker(s) very well. They are in
familiar surroundings: in their home, in the car, in family outings, in the presence of parents, guardians or close friends. The cultural knowledge and social experience each child and parent/guardian brings to the interaction is likely to be generally similar as the participants live and grow together.

These subjects were chosen because linguistically, they are capable of producing spontaneous speech in the language which their interacting partners are familiar with. Since subjects A, B, E, F and G are bilinguals (English + a Chinese dialect), the observers were instructed to observe and record CI phenomenon regardless of the code used by the subject. In terms of linguistic and communicative competence, normal children, by age four, have been found to possess awareness of certain syntactic, semantic, functional and pragmatic aspects of language to be able to 'do things' with utterances. For instance, studies on children's language by Brown (1973), Bloom (1993), and others have shown that multi-clause utterances do begin to appear in children's language as early as two years.

For most children, basic semantic-syntactic relations (e.g. expressing relations between events/ideas using 'and') are already in place by age three. Lexical and semantic meaning also begin to take on a functional and pragmatic dimension as children increase their experience with words (Lund & Duncan 1990) from this stage and beyond. What we see as overextensions of meaning at age three are a prelude to the development of non-literal meaning. This observation is significant for this study on conversational implicature. The reason being that the study of conversational implicature in this study is closely linked to intention and speaker meaning. It seeks to show that CI as generated by children is contextually
and experientially bound and not mainly linguistically reliant. Therefore, with a basic linguistic competence at their disposal, children should be able to 'do things' with utterances and express their intention in such a way as to generate conversational implicature. It must be reiterated however, that intelligence is not a criterion for their selection. The only prerequisite is that they show signs of linguistic and communicative competence reflective of normal children their age.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Observer/Subject relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>mother/daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>aunt/niece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>mother/daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>mother/daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>mother/son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>aunt/nephew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>mother/daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>mother/son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>mother/son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ K</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>mother/daughter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ Her inclusion is an afterthought (see Section 3.6.1)

* Subjects C & D are sisters

* Subjects A & E are siblings

* Subjects G & H are siblings
3.6.1 Inclusion of a 3-year-old as subject

For linguistic and developmental reasons mentioned above, the youngest subject intended for the study was age 4 years. However, during the course of preliminary sampling done on subjects C & D, it was found that their youngest sister, K (aged 3) was showing signs of being able to understand CI and to come up with novel ones herself. Consider the following conversation involving C & K:

C: Come, Sha, I comb your hair. Where’s the comb?

K: I know where. Auntie can comb for me. (runs off)

In the final utterance, K is clearly rejecting C’s offer to comb her hair after a bath. In the past, she has had a painful experience of C tugging at her manes but instead of being forthright ("I don’t like the way you do it", for instance), she chooses to give a response which literally and conventionally means that Auntie has the ability to comb her hair and is willing to do it. However, the observer, knows that K intends to convey more than what is said.

3.7 Data Collection As a Preliminary to Data Interpretation

The way in which the data is collected and recorded will facilitate data interpretation and analysis. Before recording a particular segment of conversation on paper, the observer would have taken the necessary step of assessing it according to the criteria expected of an implicature (Chapter 3.6.1). This coupled with a description of the context(s) in which the utterances are situated as well as a description of her own perception of the meaning intended by the subject
constitute preliminaries to data interpretation. This sifting process assists the researcher by relieving her from the task of going through unnecessary samples which have no bearing on the phenomenon studied.

In order to fulfill the task above and collect useful data, the observers must have a basic understanding of what CI is. So as not to make the task seem formidable and daunting to them, a brief description of the phenomenon and samples of CI found in children’s language use were given to them. They were instructed to record their samples in the same way in which the examples were presented.

The process of data collection, therefore, makes demands of the observers in the following way. Apart from performing the role of an observer and investigator, the research assignee is also required to play the role of an assessor. In the recording of data, she is required to identify the implicature observed, interpret its meaning as intended by the speaker, describe the contextual background of the conversation and give details of previous experience and shared knowledge.

3.8 Reliability and Validity

Field observational data have sometimes been referred to as brief and subjective data extracts. To get round this possible shortcoming, the data collection procedure will incorporate some of Spradley's (1979) suggestions to systematize fieldnotes and improve their reliability. Observers will be required to record examples of CIs as soon as they are generated. Expanded notes specifying the context in which a particular conversational segment has occurred and comments
on the kind of CI generated will also be required. As mentioned earlier, this in
itself is a form of preliminary analysis.

During the actual analysis, the researcher will analyze the data and extended notes
to see if each sample contains a genuine CI. This will help to reduce the degree
of subjectivity which may have crept in. For it is sometimes possible to mistake
'cute' remarks and precocious exchanges for conversational implicature.

3.9 Summary

The spontaneous and random nature of the phenomenon studied necessitates a
qualitative method of data collection and analysis. The participant observation
method adopted in this study has the advantage of allowing the observer(s) to be
involved in the daily routines of the subjects so that they can record and assess the
implicature as it occurs. The notes on context/setting, previous experience and
intentions besides providing valuable information, also serve as a preliminary to
the actual analysis of data for the researcher.