# CHAPTER THREE

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Bromley (1986, p. 23) writes that case studies by definition, "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings and desires)" (in Merriam, 1990, p. 29). Qualitative data consist of "detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviours; direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs and thoughts; excerpts or entire passages from documents, correspondence, records and case histories" (Patton, 1980, p.22 in Merriam, 1990, p. 68). Thus, I have chosen to carry out a qualitative case study on the literacy development of a young learner through the reading-writing connection emphasising description and interpretation within a bounded context.

In this qualitative case study of a young learner's literacy development in English through the reading and writing connection I sought to gain insights into three significant aspects of this development. I wanted to find out what the literacy practices of a young learner in the domains of the home and the community as well as how significant persons in these domains influence his literacy practices.

In this chapter I describe the procedures I used to conduct my research. In order to contextualise this research, I provide a description of the researcher, the key participant and the research site followed by the procedures for data collection and data analysis.

## 3.1    The Researcher

I am a secondary school English language teacher and have taught in three different schools in West Malaysia. I received my primary education in a missionary

school and secondary education in a full residential school in Kuala Lumpur. Then I went to Canada for my tertiary education and majored in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). I had my practical training in Calgary at three different schools – a high school, an adult training centre and an elementary school. It was at this elementary school that I discovered that my real interest actually lies in teaching younger children. I realized that the pre-school and elementary school years were the ideal time to begin building a good and firm foundation for learning. I was amazed at the ESL learners' joy at discovering new words, phrases or concepts and their insatiable desire to learn more and their determination to succeed knew no bounds. Alas, when I came back to work, I never had the opportunity to teach in a primary school.

Nevertheless, my interest in young learners was rekindled when I began this Masters programme. A few of the courses I took made me look harder and deeper at my own children's literacy development in the English language in which I had taken for granted before. After a lot of contemplation, I decided to use my own son as my key participant for my study on literacy development in English through the reading and writing connection.

When I approached my son and asked if he would be interested in being a part of my study, he agreed and was in fact, very eager to begin with the interviews. He also thought I was going to be a 'spy' because I said I was going to observe him:

> Are you going to be like a spy? . . . A spy is like, when I'm
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> playing, you're watching me behind the door or everywhere
>
> behind*lah* . . . A spy, like a detective (Danial, age 7).

I reflected on what he had said and it dawned on me that I am being a spy, a detective investigating the literacy practices of a boy named Danial. I have multiple roles in this

research – I am a mother, a participant-observer and a teacher-researcher. And sometimes, it is difficult to separate these roles because of my familial ties with Danial. I tend to have higher expectations of him and sometimes during the interview sessions, I had to stop myself from intervening with his answers. But Danial had no such problems because I am his mother and he is very comfortable with me around and he was being his natural self the whole time.

## 3.2    The Key Participant

Danial is seven and a half years old and he is the eldest of three children. He lives in a condominium in a city in Selangor. Danial is now in standard two and he goes to two different schools – *Sekolah Rendah Agama* (Religious Primary School) in the morning and *Sekolah Kebangsaan* (National School) in the afternoon. Every day, he walks to and from the national school because it is less than a kilometre away from his home. Every morning, he is driven to his religious school which is about five kilometres away, by either one of his parents. Along the route to and from school, he is exposed to visual texts in the form of banners, advertisements, signages and a big screen television at the main junction which he always reads especially when the car stops at the traffic lights.

Danial has a full day every day. At home, he has a timetable to help him manage his time better. He wakes up at 6.30 in the morning, has his breakfast, takes his shower and gets ready for school. He goes to school until 11.30 in the morning. Once he gets home from the religious school, which is about 12.00 o'clock, he has his lunch, again takes a shower and gets ready for school. Then he walks to his school at about 12.45 in the afternoon and he gets out of school at 6.00 o'clock. He is allowed to watch cartoons after school until 7.00 o'clock after which he has to take his shower and perform his

prayers. While waiting for dinner, which is at 8 o'clock, he plays the Playstation games with his brother. After dinner, he has to do his homework or revision or read and he goes to bed at 9.30 in the evening. However, his weekends are slightly more flexible. He has to attend his Tae Kwan Do classes every Saturday morning from 8.30 to 10.00 o'clock. But the rest of the day would depend on whether his parents have plans to take the family out or not. Otherwise, he is free to do whatever he wants.

He likes to read and he has a whole range of books from story books to informational books like *Peter Rabbit, Tales from the Carrot Patch* series, *Asian Folktales and Fables, The Book of Goodnight Stories*, the *Action Man* series to *The Big Book of Knowledge and Dinosaurs*, bought by us (his parents), grandparents and aunt. He also reads books which belonged to me when I was small like the Ladybird series and the Enid Blyton series. I used to sit with him and read the Ladybird series with him but now he prefers to read by himself.

Ever since he could read, he would read everything he could see including his father's highly technical military hardware books. He reads the newspapers but only the television programmes, comic section and the movie listings. If he were in the car, he would read the advertisements on billboards by the roadside or on the sides of buildings, banners or road signs. Sometimes he would also read in the car especially when we are traveling out of town. We always let the children bring a few of their favourite books or comics along in the car to keep them occupied. He also reads in the lavatory at home. We always keep some light readings like comics, magazines or storybooks in the bathroom. Danial seemed to have picked the habit of reading here from his parents. Besides reading, Danial also likes to draw and play the Playstation. Most of his drawings are based on the characters and the games on the Playstation or his favourite cartoon show of the moment.

### 3.3 The Research Site

Here I provide a background of the neighbourhood and the lifeworlds of the young learner in order to delineate the context of this study.

#### *The Neighbourhood*

Shah Alam is the state capital of Selangor and the majority of the population is Malay where Bahasa Malaysia is the dominant language. It is divided into many sections with well-maintained walkways, artistic lampposts along the roads, beautiful landscaped gardens and amenities like shopping centres, hospitals, wet markets, banks, schools, restaurants, stadiums, sports and recreational centres, parks and playgrounds, hotels as well as a number of tourists attractions. This city is divided into two main areas – the industrial and the residential areas. Despite the emphasis given to industrial development, residents still enjoy a high quality of living because the industrial areas are segregated from the residential areas. Residents of this city come from a range of economic backgrounds from low to high-income households.

#### *The Child's Lifeworlds*

Danial's home and schools are located in the residential section of Shah Alam. He lives in an environment that is rich with visuals and texts. His home is very colourful and cheerful. The walls are brightly painted and picture frames adorn the walls. Floor to ceiling bookshelves line one of the walls in the living room. One of the bedrooms has been turned into an office cum storeroom and Danial is allowed to use the computer here during the weekends. He has a few educational interactive softwares, which he uses as a learning tool. There are two notice boards in his home, one in the office and the other, on

the door to the office. The notice board on the door is for family use while the one in the

office is restricted to work related notices or reminders. The refrigerator is used to display

the children's artwork or schoolwork as well as pizza menus.

Danial's bedroom is also brightly decorated. It is painted in yellow and green with

a racing motif border. The ceiling has been painted like the sky with glow-in-the-dark

stars scattered all over it. There are several posters on the walls; a Spiderman poster, a

multiplication table, a go-cart poster and Westlife posters. Danial sleeps on the upper

deck of a double decker bed and he has a chest of drawers and wall mounted pigeonholes

in the shape of a house. He keeps his valuables like his coin box and his favourite toys

hidden here away from his little brothers. He has a study table in the living room and this

is where he normally does his homework.

Danial has a few favourite haunts in his town. He loves going to the *McDonald's*

and there is a big *McDonald's* restaurant near his religious school. Every time he passes

by this restaurant he would always request to go there. He also likes pizza very much.

When he goes to the Mall, he would stand in front of the *Pizza Hut* restaurant and read

the menu on the door and he would tell us what he wanted to eat which would always be

mushroom soup, Beef Pepperoni Pizza, garlic bread and Pepsi. Then, he would go to

'*SPEEDY*', the video shop and look at the videocassette discs (VCDs) and let us know

what he wanted to watch. He gets to watch movies or cartoons on VCDs at home during

the weekends and sometimes we go to the theatres at nearby towns to watch the latest

movies. His next favourite shop is the *Tamiya* shop which sells model kit cars,

aeroplanes, tanks, ships and other toys and this happens to be his father's favourite shop

too. They would browse around in the shop and come out discussing what they wanted to

get next time. Danial's next stop would be the video game shop where he buys his

Playstation game discs. He spends quite some time choosing his games carefully because he is only allowed to get one game per month.

## 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

In terms of data collection procedures, three data gathering techniques dominate my study: participant observation (observing, photographing and making notes), interviewing and the collection of literacy artefacts read or produced by the young learner.

### Participant Observation

Being a mother made it easier for me to be a part of the actual setting where the study took place. I was able to learn firsthand how my participant's actions corresponded to his words, see patterns of behaviour, experience the unexpected as well as the expected, and develop a quality of trust which only a mother and child could have, which otherwise would have taken a long time to establish. I was actually immersed in the child's lifeworlds. Throughout the study, I moved along the participant observation continuum from being "just an observer" to "observer as participant" and to a "full participant" role (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 40).

Throughout my study, I made notes of my observations, conversations or discussions, events and interactions that took place. Some of the notes were mental notes which I later wrote down, some were short notes or keywords or one-liners and some were full notes. My notes were intended to portray the contexts in which the observations and interactions took place (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I also recorded the data from the

field in the form of photographs. These images capture various aspects of Danial's lifeworlds.
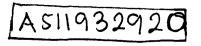
*Interviews*

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992) interviewing allows us to see how "the actors themselves construe their actions . . . [as we] get the actor's explanation" (p. 65). I conducted both formal and informal interviews with Danial throughout this study. The formal interviews were structured and semi structured in nature whereas the informal ones were open-ended questions which emerged during particular literacy events that took place at various points in the research.

*Samples of Participant's Work*

In order for me to understand further about how my young learner developed by way of literacy in English, I needed to look at how the reading-writing connection played out. Therefore I collected samples of Danial's written work as well as drawings done at home and at play which were relevant to the research context. I also examined the literacy texts that he was reading.

**3.5   Data Analysis**

All the data I had collected was analysed inductively whereby I went through the process of "making sense" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202) of what I had collected from the field. Data analysis began as soon as I had any data and continued throughout the period of data collection. The first step I took for analysing the data was reading and re-reading the transcriptions and notes while at the same time reorienting myself to the

context of the study. I began by establishing themes and concepts and from these themes

that emerged from the data, I chose some parts which I believed were more significant

than other parts. The next step was to categorize these bit of data. While evaluating and

interpreting my data, I went back and forth between theory and data, looking for patterns

and regularities or similarities. I tried to make connections and find relationships between

different parts of the data by looking at different parts of the data collected – the

fieldnotes, the interview transcripts and the child's work. In triangulating my data sources

and collection methods, I hoped to facilitate a coherent synthesis of the data and

strengthen the validity and reliability of my study.

## 3.6    Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the researcher, the key participant, the research

site, the data collection as well as the data analysis procedures of my research. In the

following chapter, I will proceed with the discussion of the findings pertaining to my

three research questions.