

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gather information regarding the composing processes of pre-intermediate ESL students in their first language and in the English Language. Based on the review of literature in the previous chapter, the researcher is of the opinion that students who have learnt writing in their first language have patterns of composing which can be compared to patterns used while writing in the English Language. The present study is an attempt to trace the similarities and differences in the composing processes of pre-intermediate students as they composed in their first language and in the English Language. The researcher choose to examine the composing processes of pre-intermediate ESL students in their L1 and in English to determine whether findings on these students in the local context are similar to the findings of other researchers mentioned in the previous chapter. The researcher also aims to test the hypothesis that pre-intermediate ESL students use L1 as the dominant language to think when composing in both their first language and the English Language.

3.2 Research Design

This present study, which is partially adapted from Ardnt (1987), Lee (1989) and Noorchaya (1994), is a qualitative research project utilizing the case study method as in many other researches on composing processes such as Zamel (1982), Edelsky (1982) and

Dryden (1987). Case study is used because the researcher is studying an instance of language use at one point of time as described by Nunan (1992) and it enables the researcher to elicit detailed accounts of processes used by the subjects. Since composing processes are generally mentalistic or internal, the researcher used multiple data collection method to obtain the data required for this study. Moreover, using multiple data collection method is also advocated by Faigley et al. (1985:173) “that the development of composing process is extremely complex and that no one methodology or instrument can elicit all the strategies that a student may employ in writing.”

3.3 Research Instruments

The data for the present study was obtained from the following sources:

3.3.1 Think-aloud Protocol

Think-aloud protocol is the major source of data for the present study. This method involves the subjects verbalizing their thoughts as much as possible during the act of composing, which is audio and video recorded. The tapes are later transcribed to categorize and code the different kinds of composing processes and behaviors according to the coding scheme on Table 1.

Critics of verbal report method as mentioned in Cohen (1998) contend that cognitive processes being unconscious acts are too complex to be captured in protocols. Verbal report is also seen as “putting too great a burden on learners’ memories for them to report mental processing with any accuracy” (Cohen 1998:36-37). Another criticism is that “thinking-

aloud protocols are intrusive, forcing the writer to speak and write at the same time" thus distorting the writing process (Faigley 1985:169).

Admittedly, writing while composing aloud into a tape recorder is not a natural act which interferes with normal composing processes as mentioned by Faigley. However, this type of protocol has been used extensively in cognitive process researches especially in composing process researches as can be seen in studies conducted by Emig (1971), Perl (1979), Lay (1982), Ardnt (1984), Raimes (1987), Dryden (1987), and Noorchaya (1994) who all had good responses from their subjects. One main advantage of this method is that it provides direct information of cognitive processes immediately since the subjects verbalize their thoughts while writing. According to Swarts, Flower and Hayes as quoted by Faigley (1985), thinking-aloud protocol not only enables the writing researcher to observe cognitive processes and the way writers organize while composing but also how writers develop ideas. Furthermore, think-aloud protocol is acknowledged to be "a valuable and thoroughly reliable source of information about cognitive processes if it is elicited with care and interpreted with full understanding of the circumstances under which they are obtained" (Cohen 1998:38).

3.3.2 Semi-structured questionnaire

Semi-structured questionnaire is used to request certain information from the subjects but their response is not predetermined. The questionnaire used in the present study to elicit details of subjects' general composing behaviors is adapted from the process log developed by Faigley et al. (1985) and questions formulated by Lee (1989). Similar to Faigley's

process log, the questionnaire used in the present study is divided into three sections (Appendix C):

- a) The first section contains questions to assess the writer's knowledge of the subject matter and strategies for idea generation and planning before he or she starts writing. For example, what came to mind when he or she first read the topic, how the writer got ideas for the essay, whether the writer made notes or outline and whether the writer had written essays similar to the one given.
- b) The second section contains questions that are prompted by research findings in terms of language usage and strategies used while writing, for example, what language the writer thought in when writing, what changes the writer made during or after writing a draft and the reason(s) for the changes made. This section also contains a process checklist which is partially adapted from Rose Writer's Block Questionnaire used by Noorchaya (1994). This checklist is to counter-check the answers given by the writer in open-ended questions and to elicit information of strategies used when writing.
- c) The third section contains questions to elicit the strategies used by the writer when writing in general, for example, how the writer usually plan, the number of drafts the writer usually writes and why writing first in their L1 helps them write in English.

3.3.3 Retrospective interview

Interview was conducted immediately after the think-aloud sessions and completion of the questionnaire to enable subjects to volunteer additional information about their composing

processes. This is in accordance with the suggestion made by Ericsson and Simon (1984) as quoted by Nunan (1992) that data collected immediately after the task or event has taken place would enhance the validity and reliability of the data. This method has also been used in other composing research conducted by Emig (1971), Raimes (1987), Friedlander (1987) and Noorchaya (1994).

3.3.4 Students' written products

The written products, which include the students' final draft and jottings, were analyzed in conjunction with the coded 'think-aloud protocols'. Coded protocols were mapped onto the written products to enable the researcher to trace where the composing processes and behaviors occurred in the course of writing as can be seen in the example given in Appendix C. This procedure was adapted partially from Arndt (1987).

3.4 Pilot Study

Before the actual study, the researcher conducted a pilot study with six pre-intermediate students. In the pilot study, the researcher used videotape, simultaneous observation, retrospective interview and semi-structured questionnaire. The subjects were not asked to think-aloud as the researcher had initially wanted to collect data through observation of overt behavior whilst the subjects wrote, thus the usage of a video tape recorder.

The subjects in the pilot study were asked to write descriptive essays on the following topic:

“A local magazine is organizing a contest on Mothers Day. You are asked to write on the topic ‘MY MOTHER’. The magazine is read mostly by young adults who will pick the winners of the contest according to the best description given.”

The writing process in their first language and in English were filmed using one video camera, which was positioned sideways for a side shot in order to capture all the six students’ facial expressions and gesture during the whole process. The students sat in two rows facing each other. Some of the students felt awkward initially due to the presence of the camera but they settled in comfortably when they started writing. The whole process was observed simultaneously by the researcher without the students’ knowledge.

When reviewing the video recording of the pilot study, the researcher encountered problem in tracing the composing processes of the subjects. This problem prompted the researcher to use think-aloud method to collect data on composing processes in the actual study. The pilot study enabled the researcher to review the methodology used and refined the questionnaire and interview method for the actual study.

3.5 Research Subjects

Similar to Noorchaya’s study conducted in 1994, the researcher selected the subjects for the present study using purposeful sampling i.e. subjects were chosen to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory as quoted by Noorchaya. In the present study, the

subjects had to be able to write in two languages, Chinese and English so that the researcher could examine the processes used when writing in both the languages, and thereby formulate the findings in relation to the research questions. Based on this criterion, five Chinese students from a private college were selected to participate in this study.

The subjects comprised three males and two females who joined the college upon completion of their secondary school education. Three of them are holders of the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) certificate and the other two students are holders of the Unified Examination Certificate for Chinese School (UEC) with an average grade eight for their English paper. Due to their low proficiency in English Language, these students, who were unskilled writers, were required to take an English Improvement Program before they could embark on their choice of university courses. At the time the study was conducted, they were enrolled in the pre-intermediate class of this program based on their score in the English Placement Test administered by the college.

All five subjects were educated in Chinese-medium schools from Primary 1 to 6 and thereafter, three of them continued their education in Malay-medium secondary schools from Form 1 to 5. Two of them continued their education in Chinese private secondary schools. All subjects took the Mandarin and English paper in the SPM and UEC examination obtaining an average grade six and eight respectively.

The subjects were chosen because they were the researcher's students with whom the researcher had formed close rapport, which is crucial in case study method of research. Another practical consideration was that the students had similar time schedules, which enabled the researcher to work out a block of uninterrupted time for each of them so that

each one could be observed in one session. The selection of these subjects was also facilitated by their willingness to participate in the study.

3.6 Data-Collection Procedures

The collection of data was conducted in the afternoon when the subjects had finished all their lessons for the day. As such, they were able to provide the time and attention to the assignment given. Before the actual composing session, the researcher held a session with all the subjects together to train them how to think-aloud. The researcher demonstrated how verbalization was carried out by writing a short paragraph on the board.

On the actual day when the composing session was held, the subjects were told to use whatever language they were comfortable with because the subjects were not proficient in English and requesting them to think-aloud in English may add another burden to them when composing. Moreover, O'Malley and Uhl (1990:93) contend that allowing informants to use their native language "has the advantage of familiarizing the respondent with the introspection process." The researcher met each subject individually for the composing aloud session which was held in a room in order to audio and videotape them composing aloud. In order not to inhibit their think aloud process, the researcher was not present in the room during the writing process.

Before they were given the topic, the researcher informed the subjects not to remove any papers so that their jottings and drafts could be collected for analysis. They were asked not to erase but to cross out words whenever there were errors or if they wanted to replace the words. The subjects were not allowed to use dictionary when writing.

The subjects were asked to write two compositions using one topic, first in their first language i.e. Chinese and then in English to obtain writings that were similar with regard to discourse type, purpose and audience:

First language writing - Write an essay describing your hometown for a Chinese magazine read by travelers from China.

English writing – Write an essay describing your hometown for an English magazine read by travelers from America.

This topic was chosen because the researcher had to ensure that the topic was manageable by the subjects who were not only unskilled writers but also not proficient in the English language. Moreover, these students have learned the descriptive type of writing in schools. The researcher provided the context and audience for the writing to motivate the subjects to write and to see whether the subjects considered these aspects when writing which could be seen from their writing. The researcher did not impose any time or word limit so that their natural composing processes could be captured in the writing session. Therefore the subjects were allowed to hand in their writing whenever they had completed the assignment. Most of the subjects completed both tasks in one hour fifteen minutes (average).

Upon completion of the first composition, the researcher collected all their writings together with their notes and drafts and the students were asked to complete a retrospective process log adapted from Faigley et al. (1985). Although Faigley designed the process log

to be completed at different points of composing to obtain information of how students write at different stages of writing, the subjects of the present study were requested to complete it at the end of the writing session so as not to interrupt their flow of thought while writing. The subjects were allowed to complete the questionnaire in whichever language they preferred. The researcher was present to provide explanation on questions that might not be understood by the subjects although the questionnaire was translated to Chinese. The subjects were then interviewed to elicit additional information on their composing processes.

After the first task, they were given a five to ten minutes break to provide a naturalistic condition since most people do not write continuously without a break in between. After the break, the subjects were given the topic question in English and were asked to write in English, also without any time and word limit. Similar with the Chinese writing session, the subjects were asked to think aloud whilst writing which was audio and video taped, complete a process log questionnaire after writing and volunteer additional information on their composing processes in the retrospective interview.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedure

Data for the present study consisted of an analysis of the audio and video taping, questionnaires answered by the students and the students' written products. The procedure of data analysis are discussed according to the instruments used:

3.7.1 Think-Aloud Protocol Analysis

The audiotapes of each subject were transcribed and translated into English by a qualified translator so that the researcher could analyze the processes used whilst writing. The transcriptions were then analyzed in conjunction with the video taping of the students writing in process. The video tapings also enabled the researcher to analyze the students' behavior during writing.

The various types of processes and behaviors were given codes based on the coding scheme on Table 1, which was adapted from those used by Ardnt (1987), Lee (1989) and Noorchaya (1994). Similar to the procedure used by Noorchaya, the processes and behaviors of each subject were parsed and coded in episodes of two minutes throughout the writing process from the beginning to the end (Tables of Composing Processes No: 4 to 13). The number of occurrences of composing processes and behaviors in each episode was totaled. Thereafter, the average number of occurrences in each subject's composing processes in the two languages was calculated and tabulated (Table 3).

The coded processes and behaviors were then mapped onto the written texts to trace where the composing processes and behaviors occurred in the course of composing as shown in Appendix C. Both the tabulation and mapping enabled the researcher to compare the composing activities in the two languages.

3.7.2 Questionnaire and Retrospective Interviews

Data from the questionnaires were also translated into English as all the subjects used Chinese to answer the questions. This source was analyzed in conjunction with the additional information obtained from the retrospective interview. Analysis of data from this source enabled the researcher to infer the strategies used by the subjects in the composing process and also to validate the usage of language while writing in the first language and in English.

3.7.3 Analysis of written products

Analysis of the students' written products including their jottings and drafts in conjunction with think-aloud protocols provided some information on how they approached the topic, their lexical choice, sentence structures, organization and changes made to their writing. As mentioned in sub-section 3.7.1, the coded processes and behaviors were mapped onto the written texts to analyze where they occurred in the writing, thereby "providing a basis to generalize the patterns and styles of each writer's composing process" (Ardnt, 1987:260).

The results of these data analyses will be discussed in the next chapter.

TABLE 1 - CODING SCHEME FOR PROTOCOL ANALYSIS

Code	Code Name	Definition
IG	Idea Generation	The writer identifies, elaborates and accesses conceptual structures from his short and long-term memory in the form of schema and proposition.
PL	Planning	General planning strategies for the contents of the text; to find a focus or topic; to decide what to include and what to exclude.
PLG	Global planning	Deciding how to organize the text as a whole.
PLL	Local planning	Planning at sentence or paragraph level.
MC	Metacomment	Explaining the procedure of writing and what one is doing
RH	Rehearsing	Trying out ideas and the language in which to express them.
RP	Repeating	Repeating key words and phrases which often seemed to provide impetus to continue composing.
RR	Re-reading	Re-reading sentence(s) – RRS Re-reading phrase(s) – RRP Re-reading word(s) – RRW
RT	Reading	Reading/glancing at the topic
RC		Reading the entire draft after completing the essay or just before writing a conclusion to the essay.
RD		Reading/glancing at a pre-drafting outline

ED	Editing	Making changes to the written text in order to correct syntax or spelling characterized by physical activities such as writing over, adding words, crossing out words and so on.
RV	Revising	Making changes to the written text in order to clarify meaning
Q	Questioning	As a means of clarifying ideas, word choice or evaluating what had been written
LT/N	Looking	Looking at text, topic or notes silently
JDI	Jotting	Jotting down ideas
TW/P	Translating	Translating words/phrases from one language to another
SW S...W		Saying words as they are being written Voicing ideas on topic, tentatively finding one's way, but do not necessarily transcribe everything that was voiced.
P	Pause	Quiet pause without activity. PS indicates short pause and PL indicates long pause.

The list of codes is adapted from those used by Ardnt (1987), Lee (1989) and Noorchaya (1994).