

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This study is basically descriptive or qualitative in nature. However, quantitative method was also used in the analysis of data. It is a classroom research whereby the concern is to improve the teacher's own practice in order to help her students produce better writing. There is no manipulation of variables as is normally done in an experimental research, and things are taken as they are.

3.1 Setting

Before I begin the description of my small study, I would like to recount a little about the students in the private college that I teach. The college is located in a Chinese-dominated area of Kuala Lumpur. It offers a range of certificate, diploma and higher diploma courses in Business, IT, Building Studies and Engineering. The programmes are twinned with a university in England. Students in my college represent three ethnic groups: about 95% Chinese, 3% Malays and 2% Indians.

Most of the students come from Kuala Lumpur and other parts of Peninsular Malaysia, but some come from Sabah and Sarawak, Indonesia, China and Brunei. They enter the certificate courses after Form 5, with SPM / MCE or UEC SM2 forecast results. Some enter into the diploma courses with STPM / HSC, GCE "A" level, UEC SM3 results or equivalent. The English entry requirement is only a pass in SPM or equivalent.

Most of the students in my classes come from Chinese-speaking families and have limited exposure to English. Almost 50% of the students barely passed English in the national Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination at the end of secondary school. Most students speak Mandarin or other Chinese dialects at home as well as with their friends. Their English language proficiency ranges from very weak (P8 in SPM) to quite good (A2 in SPM).

English teachers in my college face a lot of challenges in their classrooms, especially the Chinese students' lack of ability and self-confidence in using the English language, their shy personalities, and their passive classroom learning habits formed from previous school experiences. Due to poor mastery of the English language, most students find it difficult to follow their respective courses. As a result, they normally struggle very hard just to obtain a mere pass instead of merit or distinction in their foundation course of studies. The only positive thing that we can praise our students is that they are very hardworking and motivated to learn.

At foundation level, all students have to go through two semesters of English course which we named Foundation English. At the moment, there are nine classes of Foundation English taught by three teachers. In the Foundation English programme, the teachers teach the following five components: listening, speaking, reading, writing and personal development skills. In the writing component, narrative, descriptive and argumentative forms of writing are taught. Teachers are supposed to integrate writing with reading, listening and speaking.

The syllabus does not specify on how grammar should be taught. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to teach grammar in the way she thinks best benefit her students. However, all the teachers are communicative-based or task-oriented and we tolerate students' grammatical errors in the target language as we were all trained in Dip. Ed to teach the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM). Under KBSM, the English syllabus is very much communicative-based in nature. And grammar is supposed to be learned in context, not to be taught in an explicit way (p.6, English Language Syllabus for Secondary Schools, 1988).

3.2 Research method

The research method employed in this study is teacher research (Freeman, 1988) or action research (Elliot, 1991). The choice of a classroom research stems from the fact that I was interested in insights, discovery and interpretation rather

than hypothesis testing. Besides, I also wanted to improve my own teaching practice by experimenting a series of classroom instruction on my students.

3.3 Techniques, validity and reliability

The techniques / instruments used to collect data are questionnaire, informal interviews, feedback form, teacher's journal, teacher-fronted instruction, pre-test and post-test.

As far as this study is concerned, validity and reliability of data are safeguarded by triangulation. These will be discussed in further details in the following paragraphs.

Regarding internal validity, triangulation of data collection is done through the following sources: the student writing itself, my corrections, teacher's journal, interviewing and student feedback.

In terms of external validity or the generalizing power of the study, Elliot argues that 'What contributes an appropriate realization of value is ultimately a matter of personal judgment in particular circumstances' (Elliot, 1991: 50). This is because classroom research is very context bound. Thus, I have to provide a detailed description of the study's context / background so that readers can understand the findings.

Moreover, Van Lier (1988) has summed it up very well in the extract below.

"Classroom research is research in a field setting and therefore it will have to tackle the context of the classroom as it is. As a result, it cannot be judged by standards of generalizability and prediction (or proof), but rather by its power to create an understanding of how things happen the way they do, why they make sense to the people involved in making them happen that way. There is therefore no point in judging classroom research by criteria of internal and external validity developed for the purpose of evaluating experimental research, just as it is unrealistic to expect experimental research to shed much light on the social context in which learning takes place."

(p.52, as cited in Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar, 1996: 135)

Therefore, I do not have to be concerned with generalizing. It should be left to the readers to decide whether they want to apply the findings to their own situations. After all, my concern is to improve my own practice, not to make big claims.

Another factor that needs to be considered is reliability. Internal reliability means how consistent the data collection, analysis and interpretation is. As far as this study is concerned, to safeguard internal reliability, I have recorded the data in a consistent and systematic way. Triangulation is ensured by using multiple ways of data collection and analysis (Wallace, 1997). Among the techniques that I used in data collection are student work, student feedback and interviewing. I have also used a variety of methods to analyse the data, e.g. records of raw scores of pre-posttests, conversion of raw scores into percentage form, mean

scores of pre-posttests, frequency count for verb tense errors, and the use of college marking scheme for writing.

3.4 Selection of subjects

The selection of subjects for each round of the study was as follow : a pre-test was given to the whole class of students. After analysing the test results, weak / non-performing students were selected as subjects for the study.

3.5 Procedures

3.5.1 First Round

Subjects

I distributed the questionnaires to all sixteen students in the Foundation Business Class 1 to fill in at the beginning of the English lesson. The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out the students' background information and motivation in learning English. (Please refer to Appendix II for a copy of the questionnaire used.)

After that, I administered a pre-test on simple present tense. It was a short text with eleven blanks which required the students to fill in. I regretted that at this juncture I forgot to give them a pre-writing task to compare the results with the final writing task. I must remember this in the next round of my study.

Of the sixteen students who had sat for the pre-test, ten performed well. They all scored more than 9 out of 11. The other six did not do well in it. Student 1 only scored 5 out of 11, Student 2 scored 6, Student 3 scored 7, Student 4 scored 8, Student 5 scored 7 and Student 6 scored 8. So, I requested them to attend tutorial class that afternoon. Below is a sample copy of one student's pre-test. It was produced by Student 1.

Read the text about the weather in East Texas. Then complete the text using the words in brackets. (Hint: use the simple present tense.)

In East Texas, in the area of the Gulf of Mexico, the climate ~~are~~^{is} (to be) generally hot and often very humid. Temperatures in summer ~~are ranging~~^{range} (range) from 30 to 40 degree Celsius; 25 degree Celsius ~~is~~^{is} (to be) a normal winter temperature. It ~~is~~^{is} (to be) sometimes cold, but only for two or three days at a time; it ~~is snowing~~^{snows} (snow) perhaps once every twenty years. It quite often ~~rains~~^{rain} (rain) heavily for two or three days or more, but most of the time the weather ~~are~~^{is} (to be) sunny with bright blue skies. Occasionally there ~~are~~^{are} (to be) drouhgts – periods when there ~~are~~^{are} (to be) no rain for a long time. It ~~is~~^{is} (to be) not usually very windy, but there ~~are~~^{are} (to be) hurricanes every few years, with wind speeds reaching over 150 kilometres an hour.

$\frac{5}{11}$

Before the tutorial class, I managed to go through the students' questionnaire responses. Among the six subjects who attended tutorial class that afternoon, five were from Chinese national typed primary school and two of them even continued their secondary education in a Chinese independent high school. Only one subject came from English educational background and he was the only one who spoke

English at home and with friends. It was not surprising that he was the only one who had obtained an A2 in SPM for English. The other five subjects only managed to get C6 (two students) and P7 (three students) and they spoke Cantonese, Hakka or Mandarin at home and with their friends.

Most of the students were very motivated to learn English. For item 2.2 in the questionnaire, four students ticked *c. very motivated*, one student ticked *d. highly motivated*, and one student ticked *b. moderately motivated*. They also realised that English is important in the business world and it is also very important in their future working life. It was a great relief to find out that all of them actually liked the English language as indicated in their responses for item 2.3. They also have the opinion that English is an interesting language (item 2.10). I was glad that they have a positive attitude towards English as that would somewhat ease my teaching task.

Form-focused instruction

During tutorial that afternoon, all six students turned up on time. Teacher-fronted instruction focusing on form (that is, simple present tense in this case) was conducted on the students. This was followed by controlled practice and grammar exercises on the particular grammatical item.

One student asked me when to put an 's' at the end of the verb and when not to put during instruction. It dawned on me that they did not understand

subject-verb agreement, too. Thus, I taught the students subject-verb agreement the next twenty minutes or so. I even listed twelve singular nouns on the white board and asked them to change them into their plural forms, and vice versa. I had to teach the very basic rule such as a singular noun must be followed by a singular verb and vice versa.

At the end of the intervention, a post-test was administered (fill in the blanks) and students were requested to write a short text as a final writing task to be analysed later to see if they could use the tense learned appropriately in their writing. All the six students did much better in the post-test. The average score was 11.3 out of 14. I have attached a copy of Student 1's post-test below. He scored 11 out of 14 in the post-test compared to only 5 out of 11 in the pre-test.

Post Test 1.

Complete the text about the weather in Britain using the words in brackets. (Hint: use the simple present tense.)

In Britain, the weather is (to be) very changeable; it rains (rain) a lot, but the sun often shines (shine) too. Winters can be fairly cold and damp, with an average temperature of 5 degree Celsius in the south; it also snows (snow) often. Summers can be cool or warm, but the temperature doesn't (do) not usually goes (go) above 30 degree Celsius. It is (to be) often cloudy, and there are (to be) sometimes grey skies for days or weeks at a time. Days are (to be) long in summer and short in winter. There are (to be) sometimes fog, especially in spring and autumn, but it is (to be) not so common as foreigners think (think). Thunderstorms are (to be) quite common in mountainous areas. British people never know (know) what tomorrow's weather will be like.

11
14

I have also displayed a sample of Student 5's final writing script here. This particular student did not commit any verb tense errors at all in his final writing task.

Round 1

Post Test.

Student 5

In Malaysia, the weather is very unpredictable. This is because of the ^{location} ~~location~~ of ~~the~~ ^{the} country near the equator. So, the sun often shines ~~the~~ ^{throughout the} whole year but ~~the~~ it ~~is~~ rains often during the monsoon season. The temperature does not usually go above 34 degrees Celsius. The most of ^{the} time, the temperature is between 29 degrees Celsius and 31 degrees Celsius. Heavy rain is quite common in the east coast of West Malaysia. It rains often in ~~the~~ ^{the} November until March. It is because the North-East Monsoon brings a lots of rains to the east coast. Our country is not a ^{temperate} ~~four~~ season country, so, the ~~sun~~ ^{weather} is sunny during all the yearround.

18
25

Students' feedback

Finally, I returned the written texts to the students and asked them for some feedback. I did this orally as well as in written form. The students' feedback was

very positive and encouraging. From the feedback forms, all six students said that they found the lesson / intervention useful. They also liked the activities and they thought they had learned the lesson well. Please refer to Appendix III for a sample of the student feedback form.

On the whole, all six students thought the lesson was more effective than previous grammar lessons. Only Student 6 was not sure if the lesson was helpful to him because his final written product received a lot of red marks from me. I explained to him that those were vocabulary and expression errors, not grammatical errors.

3.5.2 Second Round

Subjects

For this round of study, I chose another English class of mine, Foundation Business Class 2. I used the same materials and procedures as in the first round to select the subjects. However, I did remember to rectify my mistake in the previous round, that is, in addition to pre-test 1, I gave the students another writing task as pre-test 2. I intended to use this same writing task as post-test 2 at the end of my intervention to compare students' progress in writing as far as simple present tense is concerned.

Of the twenty students who had sat for the pre-tests, twelve did fairly well and eight did not do well in them. The eight students who did not perform

scored below 11.2 out of 25 in pre-test 2 (writing task). And in pre-test 1, the eight students only scored an average of 6.2 or below out of 11. The other twelve students in the class scored more than 8 out of 11. A sample of one student's pre-test 1 is attached as Appendix IV. It was Student 1's work.

Once again, I singled out the non-performing students and told them to attend tutorial class that week.

Before the tutorial class, I went through the students' responses on the questionnaire. All the eight students who were supposed to receive intervention were Chinese educated (from Chinese national typed primary schools) and they had all gone through the transition class / remove class in lower secondary schools. Only one student managed to get a C6 in SPM, four students obtained P7 and the other three only had a P8. They spoke Chinese dialects or Mandarin at home as well as with their friends.

However, they were very motivated to learn English as well. Just like the subjects in the first round, they also realised the importance of English in the business world and also in their future working life. Their attitude towards English was positive. I have taught them for slightly over a month now. I have talked to them often; I also interviewed them informally many a time and I found that they were always eager to learn to improve their English as they also realised that their English was 'bad'. But they were very shy to speak the language, as they

were afraid to expose their weaknesses in front of others and 'lose face'. The fact that they actually liked the English language (as indicated in their response for item 2.3 in the questionnaire) and thought that English is an interesting language (item 2.10) is positive enough for me to follow up.

Form-focused instruction

During tutorial on Thursday afternoon, only six students turned up: one student was down with chicken pox the day before and another one's relative had passed away.

The materials and the rest of the procedures that I used in this round of study were the same as those used in the first round.

Teacher's feedback

Firstly, I returned pre-test 1 and post-test 1 to the six students respectively and asked them to compare the results. They were happy to see the significant improvement on post-test 1 as all six of them had done better in it than in the pre-test. On average, students obtained 10.3 out of 14 (73.8%) in post-test 1 compared to an average of only 6.2 out of 11 (56.0%) in pre-test 1. I have attached a sample of Student 1's post-test as Appendix IV in this report.

Next, I returned their pre-test 2 and post-test 2 respectively. Then I asked them to compare the errors made in both tests to see if they had improved. They could see that as far as simple present tense and subject-verb agreement were concerned, errors made were minimal. On average, students scored 14.6 out of 25 compared to only 11.2 out of 25 in the pre-test. A sample of Student 1's pre-test 2 and post-test 2 are attached as appendix 5. She has gained 16% after form-focused instruction.

Students' feedback

The students' feedback was very positive and encouraging. From the feedback forms, all six students said the lesson was useful. They liked the activities and they thought they had learned the verb tense well. They also had the opinion that the lesson was more effective than previous grammar / writing lessons.

3.5.3 Third Round

After having two rounds of form-focused instruction on simple present tense, I wanted to test on another verb tense, that is, future tense.

Subjects

I chose the subjects for this round of study from Foundation Business Class 1 again. Firstly, I administered a writing task as pre-test on future tense. After I had checked and corrected the students' written scripts, I found out that ten students did pretty well in the writing task except six. Of the six students who did not perform, three of them were the same candidates in the first round. I called them back for tutorial class on that day itself.

Form-focused instruction

Same procedures as in the first and second rounds, only the materials used were different this time.

Feedback

After the students had submitted their post-test written scripts for me to evaluate, I asked them for some feedback orally. They said it was easier for them to write this time compared to the pre-test. They also said they had more things to write about this time and they were "more sure" of what verb tense to use.

Finally, I asked the students to fill out a feedback form each.

An analysis of the student feedback indicated that all six students found the instruction useful (Q.2). Besides, all six students enjoyed the activities (Q.4) and

they thought they had learned the form well (Q.3). Most importantly, all six students said they thought the lesson was more effective than previous grammar / writing lessons (Q.6).

3.6 Analysis of data

3.6.1 First round

Information gathered from questionnaires were collected and analysed under the section subtitled *Subjects*. Responses gathered from student feedback forms were collected and analysed under the section subtitled *Students' feedback*.

For the pre-test, a raw score was awarded to each student and it was recorded. For the first round, the total score for the pre-test is 11. If a student, for example, made 5 mistakes, then he / she would have a score of 6 out of 11.

The total score for the post-test is 14. If a student, for example, committed 2 mistakes, then he / she would have scored 12 out of 14.

The final writing task was evaluated based on the college marking scheme for writing. The perfect score is 25 (please refer to Appendix I). In order to know how many verb tense errors a student had made, a simple frequency count was adopted as teacher evaluated the student final writing task.

3.6.2 Second round

Same as first round.

3.6.3 Third round

Same as first and second rounds.

3.7 Summary

Basically, data were collected in the form of raw scores obtained by students in the pre-test and post-test. They were recorded in a systematic and consistent way for analysis to take place more easily. Then they were converted into the percentage form. This was done to both pre-test and post-test results.

After that, gains were calculated by subtracting the pre-test score from the post-test score respectively. Mean scores of pre and post tests were also computed for comparison; i.e. to see if students have made any improvement in their writing. In addition to these, data and information were also gathered in the forms of questionnaire, feedback form and informal interviews and analysed.

Although I knew that questionnaires should not ask respondents to write down their names, I think they should (in this study) so that I could know who was who and who needed further help / interview / follow-up.

In the student feedback form, items were mostly Yes / No answer type. I did not give them a 4-item or 5-item Likert scale because I knew most people like to sit on the fence and give average answers in questionnaires. If questions were phrased in such a way that respondents must give a definite answer, then they would not sit on the fence or inclined to give average answers.

Details of the findings and interpretations will be discussed in the following chapter.