CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about the procedure and methodology undertaken by the researcher in collecting data to address the objectives of this study. The aim of this research is to bring to light the anxiety or problems that high and low ability learners of a second language go through when taking a speaking test. Hence, to address the research questions, students from two classes of different levels of English proficiency were selected to respond to two questionnaires, the first before the test and the other after. Based on the results, some students were selected to be interviewed. The data gathered are both quantitative and qualitative in nature.

3.2   METHODOLOGY UNDERTAKEN BY OTHER RESEARCHERS

This research is based on a number of other studies, mainly that of Phillips (1992), Woodrow (2006) and Kondo (2007). Their research has been found to be significant to some extent to this particular study. For instance, Phillips (1992) has studied how language anxiety affects students' oral test performance. Although the present study is not exactly the same as the said research, it has provided a theoretical framework for the researcher in carrying out her research. Phillips (1992) found that although students are interested in using the target language, research shows that the anxiety they experience can negatively affect their performance. She further adds that "this apprehension will likely be intensified by the ever-growing use of communicative oral testing, for research also provides ample evidence that anxiety increases in evaluative situations" (Phillips, 1992: 14).

The purpose of her conducting this study (1992) was to find out the effect that anxiety has on the performance of students in an oral test of French. She used a quantitative approach, as well as a qualitative approach to obtain the results of her study. Likewise, the researcher has also used the same approaches as they have been proven to be relevant in her research. The subjects of Phillips' study are thirty-five female students and nine males enrolled in the two third-semester French classes at Southwestern, which is a private university. Their age range is from seventeen to twenty-one. The data were gathered based on the oral exam that the students had to take which contributed ten per cent to their course grade.

The most significant finding was that "language anxiety actually does affect performance, but, for various reasons, the strength of the relationship is not easily determined" (1992: 20). According to Phillips, anxiety is not something which is easy to measure. In her research, she had used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure students' anxiety. However, the results were not very conclusive as the FLCAS does not exactly measure the students' anxiety in relation to the specific oral test. Thus, this is one reason why this researcher has decided to adapt the questions from the FLCAS to suit the needs of her subjects so that they would be answering the questions particularly related to their speaking presentation.

Another researcher who has researched in this area is Lindy Woodrow. In her study, 'Anxiety and Speaking English as a Second Language' (2006), she suggests that second language anxiety negatively affects the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language. This is also the view that is commonly shared by other researchers. Woodrow indicates in her research that the language learning process is debilitated by the presence of anxiety, thus making the assumption that language anxiety is debilitating.

Woodrow's subjects comprised mostly Asian students studying in Australia. These subjects were in the final months of studying English prior to entering Australian universities. The data obtained in this research come from three sources which are quantitative data from the Second Language Anxiety Speaking Scale, IELTS-type oral assessment and qualitative data from interviews. Woodrow found that anxiety does influence oral communication, and from the quantitative data, she found that her subjects do not like giving oral presentations at all. Similarly, results from her qualitative data indicate that giving oral presentations and performing in front of classmates as the most stressful situations for them.

Next, a relatively new researcher in this area, Yusuke Kondo has carried out several studies on language anxiety involving Japanese students. The study of particular relevance to the present study is one that investigates the relationship between language anxiety and proficiency in a speaking test conducted in 2007. Kondo uses sixty-four university students who are learning English in Japan as the subjects of this research. From the research, two types of data have been gathered. The first set of data is taken from questionnaires with regards to their language anxiety, while the second set is attained from a speaking test to ascertain the subjects' English proficiency.

Kondo (2007) reports that research which investigates the relationship between test anxiety and test performance have shown contradictory results. Some studies showed both positive and negative correlation between the two constructs while others indicated no correlation. Thus, the results of research in this area can still be considered inconclusive. Moreover, Kondo also found that language anxiety in a speaking test is not a good predictor of English proficiency. Due to this, this researcher aims to investigate whether Kondo's findings would parallel the results of her studies.

3.3 PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND

The research subjects were Malay students of an institution of higher learning (the Centre for Foundation Studies of the International Islamic University Malaysia) where they were pursuing pre-degree programmes. To all of them, English is a second language. The participants composed of two groups of students who were pursuing the English language proficiency course at level 6. Level 6 is considered to be the upper-intermediate level as it is the highest level that students have to complete before they can gain entry into their respective faculties to pursue with their degree programmes. Even though these two groups of participants were from the same level, i.e. level 6, one group was considered to have higher ability in English because they were first year students who had been emplaced into the highest level according to the standard set by the EPT upon entry into the Centre (refer to Section 1.2 in Chapter 1). On the other hand, the other group was deemed to have lower ability because they were second year students who had started from level 3 and were now at level 6. The lower proficiency group took three semesters to get to the level they were in, which was level 6. Hence, despite both groups being emplaced at the highest level, these two groups were compared in this study because there was a noticeable difference in their proficiency. For the purpose of this study, the lower proficiency group would be referred to as the 'low' proficiency group while the other would be the 'high' proficiency group. All participants were between 18 to 19 years of age and they had been studying English for more than 10 years.

The number of participants involved in this study was 39; with 19 from the low proficiency group and 20 from the high proficiency group. The SPM English language grades of the low proficiency group were on an average, either B or C, whereas the high proficiency group scored A in the same exam. A profile of the sample's background obtained from their teachers showed that the high proficiency group came mainly from

urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, while the lower proficiency group were not from urban areas.

The level 6 English course that they had to complete was one of the requirements that they had to fulfil in order to gain entry into their respective faculties. At this level, they were expected to have attained a reasonably high standard of English. Thus, there were assessments that they had to take which involved all the English skills. One of them was the individual presentation that was carried out to test their speaking skill.

3.4   RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Three types of instruments were used in this study; a questionnaire, an interview and test results. The questionnaire was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Other than the questionnaire, the interview was also used as an instrument to gain more in-depth information of the anxiety level of certain participants. The test results were used to gain some insights on whether anxiety played a role in the subjects' performance.

3.4.1 QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaires given to the participants were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) from Horwitz et.al (1986). Six questions were adapted from the FLCAS to suit the needs of this study (see Appendix A). An example of a statement taken from the FLCAS is "I don't worry about making mistakes in language class". This statement has been adapted to "I don't worry about making mistakes during the presentation". The reason why this statement has been changed from language class to the presentation was to suit the needs of the study. The adaptation was necessary because the FLCAS focuses more on foreign language

learning. However, the statements for the present study were more focused on the evaluative presentation that the participants had to do as part of their on-going assessment and covered the three components of language anxiety which are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Woodrow, 2006). The questionnaires, consisting of statements which the participants had to respond to, were administered before and after the presentation. The reason it was done in such a way was to find out if there was any difference in the anxiety levels of the subjects prior to and after the presentation. Examples of statements for the pre-presentation are "I don't worry about making mistakes in the presentation", "I don't feel anxious about the presentation" and "It doesn't embarrass me to speak in front of my peers or classmates". These statements mainly dealt with their thoughts, feelings and apprehension. In the second questionnaire, statements such as "I am satisfied with my performance in the presentation", "I am not worried about my grades" and "I did well in the presentation" were posed. The statements were more focused on participants' confidence level after having made their presentation.

The scale that the researcher has employed in the questionnaires is the Likert scale with the range from one to five, with one (1) and two (2) representing those with low anxiety while four (4) and five (5) would be representing those with high anxiety. The statements were arranged in such a way in order to easily determine the high and low anxiety learners through their answers.

3.4.2 INTERVIEW

Based on the data obtained from the questionnaires (refer to Tables 4.7 and 4.8 in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3), 15 out of 39 participants with high and low anxiety levels were identified and selected for the interview. Not all participants were chosen because most of them were not willing to be interviewed, citing their being busy with classes

and assignments as the main reason. Nine participants from the low proficiency group were chosen for the interview, while six from the high proficiency group were selected. The difference in number between these two groups is because the participants from the low proficiency group were more cooperative as compared to those from the high proficiency group. Out of the six high proficiency learners, only one experienced very low anxiety. He was chosen to be interviewed because the researcher wanted to compare the differences in the anxiety levels of high and low anxiety learners. The reason why he was the only low anxiety learner chosen even though there were a few others in the high proficiency group, was because he was the only low anxiety learner who was available at the time of the interview.

The questions asked during the interview were the extension of the statements from the questionnaires which needed more probing in order to gauge the subjects' in-depth feelings about their test performance. This is in line with "the rationale behind the use of interviews as a data source is that it can provide access to things that cannot be directly observed, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, or beliefs" (Denzin, 1989; Merriam, 1998 in Ohata, 2005a). All the interview sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed for convenience of analysis.

The interview questions are:

1. Are you a person who gets nervous easily?

2. Do you feel nervous about speaking in public? Why / why not?

3. Does the presence of the examiner assessing your speaking presentation make you feel nervous / more nervous? Why / why not?

4. What are the problems you face when making a public presentation?

5. Does it help to reduce your anxiety knowing that the examiner is familiar to you? Why?

6. Does your anxiety level affect your presentation / performance? How?

7. What factors cause your anxiety level to increase?

8. What is / are your major concern(s) when your presentation is evaluated?

9. Which gives you more anxiety? Public speaking in general or assessed / evaluated presentation? Why?

10. Do you have any techniques to reduce your anxiety level? How?

3.4.3 INDIVIDUAL SPEAKING ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Scores of the participants' speaking test assessment were also used to see if there was any relationship between their anxiety and test performance. A comparison was made between the results of the assessment and the results of the questionnaires and interviews to gauge whether there was consistency in their anxiety and performance levels.

3.5   PROCEDURE

The data collection was carried out with the help of the Listening and Speaking teachers of the two groups chosen for administering the questionnaires. The teachers were asked to inform the participants of the purpose of the study. After the briefing, the pre-questionnaire was distributed before the students started with their individual presentation. Then, the second questionnaire which was the post-questionnaire was administered. Finally, a few days after their presentation, those who had been selected for the interview were informed by their teachers to attend the interview session with the researcher. Overall, each participant spent about fifteen to twenty minutes to answer all the interview questions and the process ran smoothly without any major problems. All the interview sessions were taped using a tape recorder and transcribed by the researcher for easy reference. The transcription took quite some time to be completed as

the researcher had to play the tape a few times in order for the researcher to transcribe every word used by the participants.

3.6   DATA ANALYSIS

The results obtained from the questionnaires were categorised according to the scales from one (1) to five (5) so as to determine high and low anxiety learners. Those with high score were found to be experiencing high anxiety whereas those with low score were categorised as low anxiety learners. Out of these, 14 participants (depending on their availability) with high anxiety from both groups were chosen to be interviewed. Only one participant with low anxiety from the high proficiency group was chosen for the interview to compare the responses given with the high anxiety group.

In the questionnaires, a numbering system has been used whereby the scales stretching from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" have been converted and a value was given to each one. A five-point scale was used, with "strongly agree" given a value of one, while "strongly disagree" had a value of five. The reason why the conversion to value was done was to get an overview of those with high and low anxiety.

Then the data collected was analysed qualitatively by looking at the similarities and differences in language anxiety between the participants.

The scores obtained by the high and low anxiety students from the oral presentation were matched with their anxiety scores to see whether the low anxiety students performed better than the high anxiety students.