CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the beliefs and practices of three ESL teachers in a secondary school in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur. Teacher beliefs and practices are specifically examined in relation to vocabulary teaching and learning during reading comprehension lessons. This chapter will begin with a description of the research site. Then it will continue to describe the key informants selected for this study. Finally, a description of how the data was collected and analyzed will be presented.

3.1 Research Site

This study was conducted at a local government secondary school, in the district of Batu, Kuala Lumpur. The school is located in an area called Sentul. The students in this school comprise of the three major ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians.

3.1.1 The School

This study was conducted in the Bandar Baru National Secondary School or as it is better known as Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Bandar Baru Sentul (SMKBBS) situated in the heart of Sentul, about five kilometers away from the city of Kuala Lumpur. The researcher is also teaching at the same school as such the practicality and the convenience of the school as the research site was an issue not to be overlooked. This dual session school has an enrolment of 2010 students and about 40 classrooms. There are eight Form Five classrooms and from them three classes with different levels of academic performance, language ability and proficiency will be the focus of this study.
The overall academic performance of this school is average with 51% passes in Form Five. This school ranks 14 from all the schools in the Sentul Zone.

The students attending this school live in the vicinity of the Bandar Baru Sentul area. The school is located in an area surrounded by the Kuala Lumpur Municipality Council, two roomed flats. Most parents of these students work with the Municipality Council. These students come from between a low to average income group. Family incomes range from RM 500 per month to around RM 1500 per month. The average family consists of five children. However there are larger families comprising of twelve children or more.

The researcher’s experience after speaking to and teaching these students for the past six years has helped her gather valuable information with regards to their social economic status. Most parents here do odd jobs to raise their income such as drive taxies at night, do house keeping, sell food at the night market or daily baby-sitting.

In terms of ethnic composition, the majority of the Bandar Baru Sentul residents are Malays, followed by Indians and Chinese. They all seem to be very comfortable speaking in Malay or in their mother tongue (i.e Tamil, Punjabi and Mandarin or Hokkien) at home. There is very little English used on a regular basis. Being aware of this fact, the English department of the SMK Bandar Baru Sentul has decided to allocate Thursdays as the day for all teachers and students to speak in English during schooling hours.
3.1.2 Classes Observed

This study was carried out at the start of the new schooling term. The students and the teachers seemed highly motivated at this point of time placing academic excellence as priority. English language classes however, were basically held towards the end of each schooling day. Each class comprised a duration of 75 minutes per lesson. However, most of the observations were carried out during the first 35 minutes of the lesson, as this was the most crucial period to observe the actual teaching conducted by the teachers. The remaining time is often used for students to work on exercises on their own, as such there is very little active teaching.

The three Form Five English language classes observed were selected based on the academic performance, language ability and proficiency level of the students. The classes observed were 5 Maju (5 M), 5 Jaya(5 J) and 5 Bersih (5 B). The Form 5 M is a pure Science class and is considered as having the best academic performance, language ability and proficiency level. The Form 5 J is a Commerce class and is considered as an average class while the 5 B is a Social Science class and has the lowest academic performance, language ability and proficiency level.

These three Forms Five ESL classes during the reading comprehension lessons consisted of about 22 to 37 urban co-educational students per class. The total number of the students according to gender in these three classes were 42 male students and 54 female students making the total number of students involved in this study 96. There were a total of 52 Malay students, 26 Indian students and 18 Chinese students. All students were in the age range of between 17 to 18 years old.
3.2 Teacher Informants

Three teachers' beliefs and practices regarding vocabulary development during reading comprehension lessons were investigated. The teachers are chosen based on their teaching experience. One of them is the youngest in service and has been teaching English as a second language for the past five years, while the other has been teaching for about 12 years. The third teacher is the most senior in service and has been teaching English as a second language for 22 years. All three teachers are female. The youngest is an Indian teacher while the other two are Malay teachers. A review of past literature suggests that the length of teaching experience is indeed a factor shaping teachers' beliefs. The 'teacher beliefs system which consist of both subjective and objective dimensions is built up gradually over time' (Richards, 1995, p. 30). The rationale for choosing three teachers was to investigate each teacher's beliefs and practices and to make a comparison between the three teacher's beliefs and practices of the three teacher informants.

The key informants in this study comprise of Form Five teachers of English. They are observed while teaching vocabulary in their ESL classes during reading comprehension lessons. The individual profiles of the teachers selected based on their teaching experiences are as follows. Throughout the report, pseudonyms have been used to refer to the three teacher informants.

Puan Sharifah who had the most number of teaching years was 46 years old. She obtained her Diploma in Science Education in 1978 and she received her Bachelors in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) in 1991. She continued on to obtain an Advanced Diploma in Educational Management in Bristol, United Kingdom in 1999. She has taught in eight schools including the present school SMK Bandar Baru Sentul. Her
first school was the St. Francis Xavier Institution in Melaka where she taught ESL for two years. Then she taught at the Tarceccian Convent School in Ipoh for two years. After that she spent three years at the Bukit Tuggal School in Terengganu and another one year at the Terendak Camp School also in Melaka. Following that she taught at the Haji Talib Karim School in Melaka for three years; the Chong Hwa Independent School for six years and lastly at the SMK Bandar Baru Sentul for two years now. She has had a mixture of teaching experience in various parts of the country.

Puan Nadia who is 37 years old, obtained her basic education overseas. She studied English and Education at the Indiana State University in the United States of America (USA) and obtained her degree in 1985. She also obtained her Masters in TESL at the Kentucky University in USA in 1987. She has taught in two schools in her 12 years of service. She started her teaching carrier at the Zainab Kota Bahru School in Kelantan for four years and is currently teaching at the SMK Bandar Baru Sentul school for the past eight years now.

Miss Ann is the youngest in age (30 years) and has the least experience of teaching ESL. She studied Social Science at a local university, (University of Malaya) from 1990 to 1994. She is currently doing her Masters at the same university. She has only had the experience of teaching in one school, the SMK Bandar Baru Sentul for the past five years.

All three-teacher informants are graduate teachers of English, although Miss Ann’s first degree is not in the field of ESL. However, all three teachers were formally trained to teach English as a second language and have obtained a Diploma in Education
locally. In terms of teaching experience they range from 22 years (Puan Sharifah) to five years (Miss Ann).

3.3 Data Collection

In attempting to understand the reality of the classroom situation as a constructive and multi-faced phenomenon and furthermore to help capture the complexity of situations, I adopted a qualitative approach. Participant observation, interviews and the collection of authentic teaching and learning materials were the main techniques of data collection.

Such first-hand data collection using the qualitative approach is termed as “soft” data by Bodgan & Biklen, (1992) as it is ‘rich in description of people, places and conversations and not easily handled by statistical procedures’ (p. 2). I discuss these techniques of data collection in the following sections.

3.3.1 Participant Observation

In using participant observation, the inner dynamics of the classroom situations as experienced by the key informants are transcribed. The actions and talk observed in the setting, which occurs naturally is recorded as fieldnotes by the researcher. The researcher’s insight becomes the key instrument for analysis. This study employs participant observation as a data collection strategy whereby the researcher observed the teaching and learning of vocabulary in three colleague’s ESL reading comprehension classroom lessons.
Classroom based research was chosen, as these kind of research has been proven by many researchers to be more willing to acknowledge the teacher’s presence and different kinds of teaching behaviors. The researcher’s role in the classes under investigation was that of an observer. Personally, as a language teacher, the researcher is often absorbed in the purpose, procedure and logistics of the lesson and unable to observe the process of learning and interaction as they occur in a lesson as an active participant. Being an observer rather than the teacher however gives the “freedom” to look at the classroom and the lessons taught from an outsider’s perspective.

The focus of this study is teacher beliefs and practices. Both these aspects emerge from the day-to-day teaching that takes place in classrooms. The classroom itself can be considered the “natural habitat” (Wajnryb, 1992, p.13) of teachers, where their experiences are based and growth takes place. Therefore it is crucial to examine classroom processes because language classroom is the primary source of information out of which teachers will develop their own personal philosophy of what makes effective teaching and learning (Wajnryb, 1992).

Two sessions of classroom observations were carried out in each ESL class making the total number of six observations within eight weeks. The observation technique used in this study is probably best described as passive participant observation or complete observation (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The participating teachers understood that the role of the researcher was to observe the reading comprehension lessons, focusing in particular on vocabulary instruction without participating in the lesson. In each classroom, the researcher established an unobtrusive place to sit either at
the back of the classroom or along the side of the classroom. The researcher was not directly involved with the students or the teachers during any of the observations.

Tape recordings of the lessons were carried out for the purpose of running a check on classroom observation and to help in the coding accuracy. Transcribed recordings alongside with the field notes taken at the time of the recording represented a move towards an elaborate description. All the audio-tapes were transcribed after every observation to ensure nothing was missed out by the researcher. The Form Five ESL classes were observed in an authentic classroom situation and audio-taped in a discreet manner in order not to cause any anxiety among the teachers and the students.

During the participant observation, field notes were also taken. Fieldnotes are written accounts of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting of data in a qualitative study. In this study, the field notes were taken as a supplement to the interviews and the classroom observations. Fieldnotes together with the transcribed audio taping of the lessons provided comprehensive data for the observation sections.

Fieldnotes were also used as a verification tool for the researcher taking into consideration the entire verbal and the non-verbal behavior that went on during the lessons observed. Bodgan and Biklen (1992), have said that “the relationship captured by fieldwork holds best for participant observation” (p. 79).

The audio-tapes and field notes were transcribed and checked against the fieldnotes taken by the researcher as soon as possible after each observation to ensure accuracy of facts. The teachers interviewed and observed, later confirmed all the field notes.
3.3.2 Interviews

Besides classroom observations, semi-structured open-ended interviews to investigate teachers' beliefs were carried out with the teachers as a primary research tool and as a checking mechanism to triangulate data gathered from the classroom observations and archival sources. These interviews were conducted before the teachers were observed. Open-ended interviews allow the informants involved to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from a structured questionnaire.

The interview questions largely probed into the aspect of the teachers' beliefs about English in general; beliefs about language learning; beliefs about teaching ESL and beliefs about the English language curriculum as adapted from Richards, (1994) (see Appendix A). Besides these questions were other more specific questions targeting the teaching and learning of vocabulary in particular as adapted from Watts (1995) (see Appendix B) which was thought important by the researcher. The researcher prepared a total number of about 40 open-ended questions for interview sessions with teacher informants.

The teachers were interviewed before they entered their classes, as the focus of the interview was to find out the link between the teachers beliefs on teaching English as a second language in general and the teaching of vocabulary in particular and their actual practices.

As interviews are usually conducted between two people in order to get more information from the other, interviews may act as a dominant strategy for data collection or be used in conjunction with participant observation. In this study however, the
interviews were used to gather descriptive data in the informants’ own words so that the researcher could develop insights on how the informants viewed vocabulary teaching and subsequently interpreted their actions in the class. The open-ended interviews encouraged the informants to talk based on their own individual beliefs and experiences while the researcher probed more on the issues at hand. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed into notes for further analysis. Soon after the interview sessions, the teachers are observed. During the classroom observation the researcher audio-taped all verbal interactions and jotted down some fieldnotes just in case some non-verbal interactions slipped away.

3.3.3 Archival Data and Teaching Materials

Before the lesson began, the teachers' record books were looked into and during the classroom observation all the teaching materials were collected. The teachers were asked reasons for preparing each teaching material for the lessons. This was done in order to gather more information about the suitability of the materials used in relations to the students’ level of proficiency.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data collection was an on going process and data was in the form of words or conversations, rather than numbers. The data included interview transcripts, field notes, audio-tapes, personal comments and other official school records and as well as authentic teaching learning materials.

The data was analysed inductively therefore nothing was considered trivial as all the data had the potential of being a clue that might reveal a more comprehensive
understanding of what was being studied. The data were coded categorically and searched for patterns and emergent themes. A taxonomy of Methods for Teaching Vocabulary adapted from the study done by Watts (1995), (see Appendix C) was used as a checklist to categorize the instruction observed. Since the focus of this study was not on individual cases, but on similarities and difference across cases, the basic procedure was one of cross case analysis (Patton, 1990, in Watts, 1995).

3.4.1 Fieldnotes

Data from classroom observations were analysed using a taxonomy of methods for teaching meaning vocabulary was adapted from the study done by Watts (1995) (as in Appendix C). This taxonomy lists five broad categories; definitional; contextual; organizational (based on semantic framework); mnemonics and structural. To facilitate this study, definitional instructions is defined as a description or statement of a word’s meaning.

Each of these broad categories was subdivided into more specific instructional methods such as definitional by a dictionary, a glossary, a thesaurus, a word bank or word log, the teacher or other students. Contextual instructions indicated the target word presented in a full sentence, a passage, a fill-in-the-blanks, a sentence, a discussion, or with a picture. Organizational on Semantic Framework included semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, categorizing, analogies, examples and non-examples, synonyms/antonyms and homophones. Mnemonics referred to paired association and the keyword method or pegword method. Structural referred to root words and affixes, compound words, contractions, and etymology/derivation.
These broad categories and their respective subcategories were based on a review of the literature of method of vocabulary instruction as well as the results of a pilot study done by Watts (1995). The taxonomy was designed to reflect both instructional methods touted in the literature as well as instructional methods observed in actual classrooms.

3.4.2 Interviews Transcript's

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain more information about the teachers' reading comprehension lessons with relations to the development of vocabulary in particular. A list of general questions pertaining to teachers' beliefs was asked to the teachers followed by more in-depth questions on the beliefs about teaching vocabulary in their ESL classes. The answers to these questions were then compared and contrasted to search for patterns of emergent themes and differences.

3.4.3 Teaching-Learning Materials

The teaching materials were collected and analyzed based on the teachers' stated purposes for using the said materials. The level of students' academic performance, language ability and proficiency level was taken into account and compared with the teaching materials used by each teacher.

3.5 Teaching Materials

In probing teachers' beliefs and practices with regards to vocabulary development, during reading comprehension lessons, a cross case approach involving comparison between three teacher informants in a secondary school was used. Data collection
involved eliciting from teachers their experiences, professional views and beliefs as well as uncovering their actual day-to-day practices with regards to teaching vocabulary during English reading comprehension lessons. This enables the researcher to analyze both these aspects of teachers' beliefs and teacher practices to see if there was congruence in the actual day-to-day realities of ESL teaching and learning.