CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology adopted in the present study of e-mail communication in a local business community. This includes a discussion on the research premise, research tools, research procedure, the corpus and data analysis.

3.1 Research Premise

Insights gained from theories and research work reviewed in Chapter 2 have helped to shape the following research premise of this study:

a. authentic data is obtained from natural setting – research was aimed at investigating e-mail communication as it routinely occurred in the business community or workplace selected;

b. linguistic data is in the form of whole texts;

c. grammatical description is vital in analysing a discourse (Halliday: 1985; McCarthy: 1991);

d. language is a social phenomenon, thus linguistic features in a discourse should be examined in relation to the social context they occur in.
3.2 Research Methods

Based on the above research premise, the following research methods were used in this study:

3.2.1 collecting electronic mail (e-mail) texts from key informant;

3.2.2 discussions with key informant;

3.2.3 examining company documents.

The following sub-sections describe the purpose of each tool and the kind of information that was sought.

3.2.1 Collecting of E-mail Texts from Key Informant

Electronic-mail messages produced by a group of business executives in the business community selected i.e. ASC (m) Sdn. Bhd. (a pseudonym) which form the major part of the data under study, were obtained through a key informant who is an employee of the company. The key informant for this study was chosen for the following reasons:

a. she is holding a key position as an IT Training Sales Specialist in the company;

b. she has had 8 years working experience in the company as well as in e-mail communication;
she had agreed to provide the researcher with e-mail texts from routine communication at the company, and useful information on the workplace culture of that community. She had also agreed to co-operate with the researcher in explaining as well as in verifying data.

Further information on the e-mail texts obtained from the key informant is provided in Section 3.5 below.

3.2.2 Discussions with Key Informant

Informal discussions were made from time to time over the telephone with the key informant. The discussions were conducted with simultaneous reference to the content of the e-mail messages. The discussions were carried out whenever the researcher needed clarification on particular elements in the e-mail messages.

3.2.3 Examining Company Documents

The following documents from the company were examined to obtain additional information on the culture of the particular workplace:

- company prospectus for shareholders;
- departmental brochures for clients
• job description of executives holding different positions.

The above documents have helped to provide background information on the business community selected, and the relationships between members of the business community and the recipients of the e-mail messages under study.

3.3 The Business Community Selected

The business community selected for this study consists of 23 executives in a public limited company in Malaysia dealing with office computer systems – hardware and software, named ASC (M) Sdn Bhd. (a pseudonym of the actual company). ASC provides a broad range of IT solutions and services, specialising in software design and development, systems and network integration and engineering services. With its headquarters in Petaling Jaya, the company has 23 branch offices strategically located throughout Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak with a staff strength of about 550 employees. Among its business partners are some world class IT vendors like IBM, Microsoft, Novell, Epson, Hewlett Packard, Compaq and Sun Microsystems.

Background information of the executives whose e-mail messages were examined in this study, is obtained from the key informant and from a company document, "Trainers' Particulars". The information is shown in Table A on the next page.
Table A: Background Information on Senders of the E-mail Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Year Joined Company</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>IT Training Sales Specialist</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Channel Sales Manager</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Bachelor Degree in Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Course Coordinator</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Malaysian Certificate of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Systems Engineer</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Degree in Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Sales Executive</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Diploma in Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Departmental Manager</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Diploma in Private Secretariship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Sales Manager</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Sales Executive</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Sales Executive</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Sales Manager (Branch)</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Branch Manager</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Division Secretary</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Legal Adviser</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>L.L. B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Administrative Officer</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Sales Executive</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Degree in Japanese Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Sun Biz Dev. Manager</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Degree in Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Sales Executive</td>
<td>Not available.</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Departmental Manager</td>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Information not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Training Instructor</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Training Instructor</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Bachelor of Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Senior Systems Engineer</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Bachelor of Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Senior Systems Engineer</td>
<td>Not available.</td>
<td>Bachelor of Applied Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the table above, it can be seen that most of the executives have had more than 2 years
of working experience in the company. The researcher was told by the key informant that the company has been using the e-mail system for internal communication for almost 10 years. It has to be clarified here that information concerning the work experience and qualification of some executives in the community under study was not accessible to the researcher, which is the reason "Information Not Available" has been stated in some of the columns in the table.

The e-mail communication of the executives was selected for this study due to the following reasons:

a. English is the major language of their operation;

b. e-mail is part of their daily communicative system;

c. all of the executives are non-native speakers of English;

d. the key informant is from this group of executives, enabling the researcher to have easy access to e-mail communication among the executives, as well as with their business partners and clients.

3.4 Relationship between Senders and Recipients of the E-mail Messages

In analysing the discourse of e-mail communication in the business community selected, the study also considers whether the relationship between the senders and the recipients of the e-mail messages has influenced the language in the discourse. In the
corpus, the relationship between senders and recipients of the messages is of the following types:

i) ASC executives and their colleagues in the same department;

ii) ASC executives and their colleagues from other departments or divisions in the company;

iii) ASC executives and their regular clients;

iv) ASC executives and their prospective clients;

v) ASC executives and their business partners.

The majority of e-mail communication in Category (i) and Category (ii) can be considered to be the lateral type of communication, that is between colleagues on the same level in the company's organisation chart. Even though some of the mail senders are holding senior management positions in the company, the others who are in other positions are not their subordinates; they are just working in different departments. Thus, communication between them cannot be considered as the downward type of communication, that is from superiors to subordinates, nor the upward type of communication, that is from subordinates to superiors. E-mail communication in Category (iii), Category (iv) and Category (v) are also of the lateral type of communication, as in these three categories, there are no parties considered to be superiors or subordinates by one another.
3.5 Research Procedure

The procedure for collecting the data started with the researcher first identifying the business community i.e. executives of a local company in the Information Technology industry. The researcher then gained access and negotiated entry into the business community by seeking the approval of the key informant. The study was explained to her along with its objectives and purpose. Through the key informant, the researcher managed to obtain e-mail messages of the executives from the month of December, 1998 to the month of May, 1999.

During the six months mentioned, informal discussions with the key informant were conducted from time to time concerning the content of the e-mail messages. Efforts were also made to verify the description, explanation and interpretation of data with the key informant.

3.6 The Corpus

The corpus comprises 102 e-mail messages from the communication of the executives in work contexts. The data collected only covers e-mail communication of the executives with their interactants for a period of 6 months, i.e. from December, 1998 to May, 1999. According to the key informant, the e-mail messages obtained through her for this study were actually 70% of the overall e-mail communication among the executives in the company. The remaining 30 % of the e-mail communication in the
company was not provided by the key informant for reasons of confidentiality. Thus, the corpus can be said to be fairly representative of the range of e-mail communication in the business community. For reasons of confidentiality too, the names and e-mail addresses of the senders and recipients as well as the name of the company concerned in the data are blotted out. To refer to the e-mail messages collected, please refer to Appendix 1 and the guideline accompanying it for easier reference.

3.7 Data Analysis

In analysing the data collected, the researcher has adopted the suggestion of Brown and Yule (1983) to describe regularities in the linguistic realizations used by individuals to convey meanings and intentions in a discourse. To identify such "regularities" in the e-mail messages, the researcher has based her description on the "frequency with which a particular linguistic feature occurs" (Brown & Yule: 1983) in her discourse data. As postulated by Brown and Yule (1983, 22), the frequency of occurrence need not be as high as 90% to qualify as a regularity since the discourse analyst is mainly concerned with the level of frequency that is significant in "perceptual terms" (Brown & Yule: 1983). Thus, linguistic features which are examined and described in this study may not necessarily be those that have a frequency of occurrence that is as high as 90%.

Due to the modest size of the corpus investigated in this study, a detailed statistical analysis was not conducted. However, a frequency count of the number and /
or percentage of occurrences of features in the messages has been conducted to support the findings.

Based on the research questions mentioned in Chapter 1, the e-mail messages were examined for these three aspects:

3.7.1 the grammatical features of the e-mail messages;

3.7.2 the communicative functions of the e-mail messages;

3.7.2 other discourse features of the e-mail messages.

This study examines grammatical features in the data as it is felt that grammatical description is fundamental in a discourse analysis. This perspective is actually based on Halliday's (1985, xvii, Introduction) view that a "discourse analysis that is not based on grammar is not an analysis at all but simply a running commentary on a text". This is reinforced in McCarthy's statement (1991: 34) that without a "command of the rich and variable resources of the grammar offered by a language", the construction of natural discourse is not possible.

Thus, one of the methods of data analysis in this study is what is referred to as the analysis of grammatical features of e-mail messages in the selected business community, a method adapted from one of the three levels of linguistic analysis suggested by Bhatia (1993, 24 - 28). Looking at the nature of the data, the researcher is convinced that this level of linguistic analysis provides a comprehensive and sound framework to analyse language use in the e-mail communication of the selected business community. In this
type of analysis, the e-mail texts are analysed quantitatively by studying the specific grammatical features which are "predominantly used" (Bhatia: 1993) in the texts. This is done by a frequency count of the grammatical features related to clauses, the different types of mood, the tenses and the use of modals. With this linguistic analysis of the frequency of syntactic properties in the e-mail texts, it is hoped that relevant empirical evidence can be provided in order to "conform or disprove some of the intuitive and impressionistic statements that we all tend to make about high or low incidence of certain lexico-grammatical features" (Bhatia: 1993, 25) of a certain type of discourse. However, to avoid emphasis on only the surface features in the e-mail texts, the study also discusses the way communicative purposes or functions are accomplished in the particular discourse. In other words, the findings are to be informed by investigation into the rationale underlying choice and distribution of surface linguistic features (Bhatia: 1993, 26). The study attempts to explore the reason(s) e-mail writers made certain language choices. Thus, description of the data is not just related to the forms of language in the e-mail messages, but also to the functions of the language forms in the e-mail texts.

The works of grammar exponents like Halliday (1985) and McCarthy (1991) are also referred to at some parts of the discourse analysis for insights into the rationale of certain language choice and linguistic features in a discourse. Well-known and reliable sources of grammar forms and functions like Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1995) and Betty S. Azar's (1989) grammar textbook, Understanding and Using English Grammar are also frequently referred to in the course of analysing language forms in the corpus.
Collins Cobuild provides a comprehensive discussion of the English grammar system based on a "long and careful study of present-day English" (Collins Cobuild: 1995, 'Introduction'). The information in the book is derived from a study of millions of words from speech and writing gathered together in a computer and analyzed, partly by computer and partly by a team of expert compilers (Collins Cobuild: 1995). Thus, the researcher feels that it is a reliable source of reference during the analysis of the grammatical features in the e-mail messages of this study.

In addition to Collins Cobuild, the researcher also refers to Betty S. Azar's Understanding and Using English Grammar (1989) as it provides clear explanations on the various verb forms and complex structures in the English grammar system. Thus, it is considered an adequate supplementary reference for the researcher to analyse the data.

The investigation of grammatical features in the data focuses on the main clauses and subordinate clauses, following the rationale set forth by Halliday (1985) that clauses are the "larger units" (Halliday: 1985) of the discourse structure and "it is the larger units that function more directly in the realization of higher-level patterns" (Halliday: 1985, 21). A clause is defined as a group of words that contains a subject and a verb (Azar: 1989), but which is part of a sentence (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: 1995). The term "main clause" refers to a clause which contains the main subject and verb of a sentence, and can exist independently; thus it is also called an "independent clause". A "subordinate clause" on the other hand, cannot exist on its own and must be connected to the main clause (Azar: 1989).
The main clauses in the corpus are examined in terms of the different moods they are in, that is whether they are in the imperative, declarative or interrogative mood. This focus of the grammatical analysis in the study is based on the fact that the identification of mood can be related to the different uses of language (Collins Cobuild English Grammar: 1995).

To examine the discourse features and structure or organisation of the e-mail messages, the study has also adopted and adapted from two other researchers of computer-mediated communication, namely Jonathan Gains (1999) and Denise Murray (1985, 1988).

The e-mail samples are examined for discourse features in the light of the following aspects:

(i) openings and closings

(ii) paralinguistic cues (Murray: 1988)

(iii) simplifications of language (Murray: 1988)

Following the approach of Gains (1999), the study looks at the openings and closings of the e-mail texts in terms of the variety of opening and closing salutations or greetings employed by the senders of the messages. In addition, the researcher has decided to add two other discourse features of the e-mail messages for analysis namely opening statements and closing statements as it is felt that discourse analysis of the e-mail communication should include a study of these features rather than just analysing the
(1988) and Angell's & Heslop's (1994) classification:

- subject-pronoun omission

- contraction.

3.8 Conclusion

To sum up, the research methodology involves a combination of approaches to analyse the e-mail discourse in the local business community. The corpus is examined for grammatical features, functions played by the discourse and other discourse features in the data. A frequency count of the number and / or percentage of occurrences of such features in the e-mail messages, is conducted to support findings. The results of this investigation are reported in the next chapter.