CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide a description of the research design, method of data collection, the research instruments employed in the study as well as the method of study and data analysis. The section on research design provides information on the main characteristics of and the rationale behind the research design and method adopted in this study. A detailed description on the method of collecting data will be provided next. The purpose is to explain the process involved in the selection of business organisation and respondents. A description of the research instruments utilised in the study and their rationale will follow. Information on why the particular instruments were chosen will be provided and the features of each instrument will be described. Lastly, information on method of study and data analysis will be provided to explain the manner in which each instrument was implemented and how the data obtained were to be analysed.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study aims to investigate whether the reports produced by a selected group of students meet 'acceptability' standards of the workplace. It is a qualitative exploration of relevant gatekeepers' expectations of business reports, using the case study method in obtaining the data needed to answer the research questions.

3.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research describes events, persons and so forth scientifically without the use of numerical data (Best & Kahn, 1989), relying instead on written or spoken word or the observable behaviour of the person being studied as the principal source of data for analysis (Bloland, 1992). The focus of this kind of research, thus, is on the perceptions and experiences of the participants for the purpose of developing an understanding of a particular situation, event, or issue.

The present study necessitated a qualitative approach to data collection because it involved an attempt at gaining a preliminary understanding of target situation requirements and standards associated with written business reports, in the light of relevant individual's professional experiences and perspectives. In this case, the researcher sought to obtain information on standards for reports that have not been previously determined or established. A qualitative perspective in addressing the research questions was thus necessary because no variable could be determined in advance as 'little is known about the dimensions of the phenomenon being studied before one talks to the participants' (Bloland, 1992: 2).

The task for the researcher, then, was to explore and discover from the perspectives of employers, as gatekeepers in a business organization, concerning what the standards expected of reports are, and whether a selected number of ESP students' productions are capable of measuring up to them. Radnor (1994: 4) in writing about her research approach believes that for a qualitative methodology, 'it is not possible to enter the field with a tight research design that lays out a schema of what is significant and important to find. Rather, one enters the field with a set of general problems in mind as well as a theoretical framework........orientated around a research question that is asking, 'what is going on here?'

A second reason in adopting a qualitative approach is because the study measured writing quality (that of the student subjects') in a 'natural way', that is writing quality as assessed in the workplace by people responding to business messages (Sydow Campbell, Brammer et.al, 1999: 76). It is most often the case that business organizations use no specific kinds of formal tests to evaluate routine and regular written performance but judge the effectiveness or quality of written documents based on how well they serve organizational purposes. Hager (1992) for instance, writes that evaluation of document effectiveness (say that of a report) could be based on such aspects as attention to audience needs and report purposes. Suchan (1998) in his study on the effect that reports written in a high-impact style writing have on organizational decision making found that 'complex, external-to-the-document contextual factors shape readers' responses to the documents. In many ways, therefore, performance in organizational setting is evaluated not by a test but by the overall success of the endeavour – the success of the writing as a rhetorical or social action (Freedman, 1996: 410). Evaluating performance in this way, thus would have to be a qualitative undertaking on the researcher's part.

The following are the main characteristics of the research design in this study:

1. It was primarily qualitative. No standardized tests were used and experiments carried out. It is believed that quality judgements on the students' reports provide a more realistic assessment of writing quality in the workplace than do standardized or objective tests (Sydow Campbell et.al., 1999).

2. It used external criteria to judge the quality of student reports based on 'acceptability' standards in the workplace. In this case, the assistance of employers, as the relevant gatekeepers, was sought and enlisted as informants in the study.

3.2.2 Case Study Method

A case study is an in-depth investigation of an instance or event. Adelman et.al. (1976) as cited in Nunan (1992: 72) suggests that it is 'the study of an 'instance in action', where one selects an instance from the class of objects or phenomena one is investigating (for example a second language learner or a science classroom) and investigates the way this instance functions in context'. The researcher finds the case study method to be appropriate for her study due to the following reasons:

1) Firstly, finding out about 'rules of acceptability' for written documents in the workplace, and whether the ESP course that students took prepared them for the kind of writing expected there is an interesting area of concern for practitioners. Nunan (1992) citing Adelman et.al. (1976) writes that one of the advantages of the case study is that it is 'strong in reality', therefore, practitioners will be able to identify with the issues and concerns raised. This particular element of the case study is in tune with the intentions of this study to provide language teachers with some insights on the standards expected in business reports as a way of refining how reports are taught in class. It is also an important fact to the researcher that the results of case studies can be put to immediate use for staff/institutional development and formative evaluation (McDonough, 1997: 217).

2) A second rationale behind the choice of the case study method had to do with certain practical considerations relating to data access and time availability. It was expected in this study that acquiring the needed data would require some organisational support in terms of willingness, on the part of the employer, for instance, to sacrifice business time for interviewing and reading (reports). Therefore, access to information/data would be dependent on the number of people willing to set aside the time and effort to do so. The case study was found to be a practical and feasible choice in research method because it

allowed the researcher to use a small sample population (of students and gatekeepers) instead of a large sample, and to carry out an in-depth investigation within a limited timescale.

3. Thirdly, the study had some element of uncertainty concerning areas such as the standards that exist for reports and the students' learning outcomes. When such a situation exists, the case study method allows the researcher the opportunity to explore the situation and develop an understanding of main areas of concern, identifying at the same time important areas to look at more extensively in future research (Lynn, 1991). Therefore, it is an appropriate method for a study such as this one, that sought to obtain a preliminary understanding of business reports as a means to identifying key issues/areas in improving the teaching and writing of reports in the classroom.

Like many qualitative researches, there is no single method of obtaining data. Cases are objects to be studied and are not themselves synonymous with any particular techniques. They are for this reason methodologically eclectic, with a number of different permutations and possibilities of choice (McDonough, 1997: 207). Since the study involved an analysis of written products to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the ESP course in question, the researcher has considered as a starting point Breen's (1989) division of evaluation into three stages : task as workplan, task as process and task as outcome. In investigating whether students' written reports are up to standards expected of new graduates in the workplace, only outcome data was given main emphasis. The feedback obtained from the gatekeepers will pave the way for further evaluation into other necessary areas in the course.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

The data collection in this study involved the following steps:

1. Identification of a particular party, namely the selected business organisation, which can serve as a reliable source of information on current report writing activities in the workplace, the nature of the reports, and the standards expected in the reports. This stage involved gaining access to and negotiating entry into the discourse community.
2. Identification of the group of ESP students who can provide the corpus that represents written products of would-be members of the discourse community.
3. Assignment of report writing tasks/topics set by the gatekeepers to the student subjects.
4. Evaluation of the corpus of student reports by gatekeepers based on their expectations of an acceptable report.
5. Interviews and discussions with gatekeepers, course instructor and students respectively on possible areas of improvement to the reports. Implications to the Report Writing component of the course will be specifically noted.

3. 3. 1 Selecting The Business Organisation and Negotiating Entry

It is necessary at this point to discuss the business organisation in question and the initial groundwork carried out by the researcher before embarking on this study.

The organisation chosen for this study comprises a group of companies (one parent company and five subsidiaries), each headed by one Senior Manager. The organisation's line of business is in providing online financial information and transaction services to the country and abroad. This includes disseminating both local and regional financial information from the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE), the Kuala Lumpur Options and Financial Futures Exchange (KLOFFE) and the Asia Financial Exchange (AFX-Asia) to other business organisations, individual subscribers and the general public through specific Information Services Network such as the 'Fish Net'.

In line with the organisation's aim to provide reliable information services in the most effective and efficient way , constant efforts are taken to acquire new financial contents in introducing better value-added financial information services, and developing softwares that provide better network services and international connectivity to subscribers and content service providers.

These efforts present the organisation with the competitive edge needed to prosper in the dynamic and rapidly changing business environment . A cursory glance at some of the proposals written by personnel in the organisation revealed this need to be competitive, especially in view of the recent economic downturn. In addition, the government's initiative in establishing the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) propels Information Technology (IT) related industries such as this one to be more efficient and competitive in order to meet the challenges of the next millenium. Therefore, one of the reasons why this particular organisation was selected is because it best represents a fast growing company which strives for standards of excellence to better its position in the market.

Another reason for choosing this company is that the language used to conduct business is primarily English. The researcher was given the opportunity to look at some of the organisation's corporate documents (proposals and reports) and found that all were written in English. It would seem that the importance of good communication skills in English for an organisation responsible in disseminating financial information clearly and effectively to various customers is evidently crucial. Therefore, in view of its position in the market and the emphasis the organisation places on English, the need for skilled, communicatively able graduates would also be very important to the organisation.

As the focal point of interest is the organisation and its report writing practices, it was necessary for the researcher to gain access into the organisation and carry out some initial groundwork not only to understand its background but also to decide whether the selection of that particular organisation was appropriate to the study. First and foremost, gaining access to the organisation was made easier because the researcher is related to one of the gatekeepers. This also provided for easier access to company documents. However, in keeping with ethical considerations, permission was still formally sought and confidentiality strictly maintained at the request of the gatekeeper.

Background work that was carried out prior to the study involved several informal discussions with the gatekeepers as well as an examination of some corporate documents such as the company profile, proposals and reports to gain some insight into the organisation's report writing practices. This preliminary investigation revealed that proposals and reports make up the major bulk of its written communication (see Chapter 1 on Background to the Study), and that the organisation sees writing to be important. The researcher was confident that this particular feature of the organisation's writing activities will be an advantage towards realizing the objectives of the study.

The next step in the process of negotiating access to the organisation was to arrive at an understanding with the gatekeepers concerning the purpose of the study. This required the researcher to provide some relevant information on the Report Writing component in the English for Business course at UKM, its aims, as well as problems associated with the quality of students' written skills and employers' expectations, in general. It was specifically made clear to the gatekeeper that our (ESP teachers') intention was to gain some perspective over what standards are looked for in a report and other written products so that we can in turn try provide graduates who are equipped with the knowledge and skills required for success in the workplace. That they (the gatekeepers) themselves posesss the knowledge and expertise on what these standards are in written reports is an important element in the study.

Ainol (1993) found that this 'Pre-fieldwork' stage of gaining entry or 'getting into the setting' stage in the research process to be 'beneficial in strengthening relationship with the gatekeepers'. This is true as the gatekeepers would then be able to understand and appreciate the value of the study to the interests and needs of both parties. It is worth mentioning at this point that initial approval to the study was achieved because the gatekeepers were themselves interested in addressing the quality of reports they had read over the years. This somehow provided a common ground between their interests and the study's aims and objectives. It also paved the way for easier negotiation in obtaining the gatekeepers' agreement to evaluate the reports written by students, as planned out in the study.

An agreement was reached that two gatekeepers/Senior Managers participate in the study by providing the report writing topics to be assigned to student subjects, and evaluating those reports upon completion. To conclude, gaining access to and negotiating entry into the organisation was not a straightforward process. It was done in the best possible manner to avoid being intrusive and demanding.

3.3.2 Selecting the Respondents

3.3.2.1 Selection of Students

Initially, one group comprising thirteen third year undergraduates at UKM was chosen as subjects of the present study. They were Faculty of Business Administration (FPP) students taking English for Business II as part of their degree requirements. The main rationale for selecting the third year student population was because firstly, the students are assumed to have gained a certain level of competence in language and content, having taken most, if not all, the required courses necessary for graduation. Secondly, they best represent graduating students who are soon making the transition from academia to the workplace; therefore they would be in a better position to possess the necessary language skills and qualities expected of end-user institutions.

However, in the first three weeks of the semester, the group composition changed due to problems of timetable clashes causing some shiftings between classes. As a result, the group grew bigger in size to a mix of twenty four second, third and fourth year students from both the FPP and Faculty of Economics (FE) departments. The following is a general description of the student population in the group:

		Student Category A	Student Category B
Year	:	Third & fourth year	Second year students
Faculty	:	FPP and FE	FE only
General English course taken	:	2-3 proficiency courses	1 proficiency course
ESP course taken	:	English for Business I	English for Business I
Status	:	Graduating students	Non-graduating

Despite changes in the group's original composition, all of the students were chosen as subjects in the study. This decision was made primarily due to constraints of time whereby the report writing task in the course was scheduled to start as early as the second and third week of class. Therefore, there was little time to find another group as substitute. Retaining the original group also seemed more feasible because the researcher had already negotiated access to the classroom and obtained agreement from both the students and class instructor to participate in the study. This included gaining the class instructor's willingness to have the report topics assigned by outsiders, something which some teachers may find a little imposing, perhaps.

In addition to the above practical and ethical considerations, the decision to take the group was made on the basis that all of the students can be described as relatively homogenous, except for only one distinguishing characteristic, that is, whether they are graduating or non-graduating students. Firstly, in terms of proficiency level, the third year students, despite getting a lower SPM English grade than the second year student, would have attained an adequate level of proficiency, having taken the necessary proficiency courses and the pre-requisite ESP course to English for Business II. In addition, the course itself took in students of different faculties and different years indicating that no difference is placed between the two categories of students.

Nonetheless, to allow for possible competing variables, the researcher requested that the class instructor group the students according to their faculties and year of study for their groupwork report writing assignment. This could work out to be a better arrangement as there will then be an opportunity for comparison in performance between groups of students. There were altogether a total of nine groups of students, thus a total of nine reports were available for evaluation (these are attached as the corpus, and are available upon request to all interested readers).

3.3.2.2 Selection of Gatekeepers

A total of two senior managers were selected as gatekeepers (GK). They were from the Marketing (referred to as GK 1) and Human Resource (referred to as GK 2) departments of the organisation. GK 1 had been with the organisation for two years, working firstly as a Business Manager at the same company for six months before moving on to his present position as Senior Manager of the Marketing department. His previous designations also included Manager of Corporate Planning in another company. GK 2 had been with the organisation for seven years. Her managerial positions in the organisation include the position of an Operations Manager which she held for three years and Senior Manager (current).

Their selection as GKs was made on the basis that they were willing to take part in the study. This ensured the researcher the cooperation she needed for the study. Most importantly, though, the GKs' positions, their roles in the organisation and job demands characterize them in many ways as 'specialist informants', that is, 'practising members of the disciplinary culture in which the genre is routinely used' (Bhatia, 1993: 34), which was an important element in the study for several reasons. Firstly, these Senior Managers, technically, represent the Management, and thus their familiarity with managerial writing tasks and activities, especially those that are essential for organisational decision making processes places them in a better position to provide the information needed on the quality and standards expected of written documents in the organisation.

Secondly, the GKs' roles in the organisation and their job demands engage them considerably in writing as well as reading work-related documents. This was gauged during earlier discussions with the GKs. It was found that in addition to writing reports and proposals, these managers read, edit and approve reports from various departments within the organization. Therefore, they can be said to possess the essential knowledge or access to information on successful target-level behaviour, as far as written communication is concerned.

In addition to all that, the position of the GKs as Senior Managers would provide them with the chief responsibility for producing a report, and thus they were capable of identifying issues relevant to the business community. This last factor concerning the selection of the managers as gatekeepers in the study is important because it enabled the researcher, as part of her study, to obtain report writing topics on areas appropriately related to the organisation's line of business.

3.3.2.3 Selection of Course Instructor

There was only one course instructor. She holds a bachelors degree in Business Administration (BBA) and a diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). Her professional qualification included a Certificate in the Teaching of Business and Technology. She had been a language instructor at UKM for five years but had actually eight years of teaching experience, having firstly taught English in secondary schools in Malaysia. She had taught a number of ESP courses to undergraduates at UKM, most prevalent of which were English for Business I and English for Business II. Therefore, the researcher was confident that the course instructor would be able to provide pertinent information on the ESP course, its Report Writing component and improvements needed, if any.

The course instructor was chosen as one of the subjects in the study because she happened to be the instructor appointed by the faculty to teach the particular group of students. However, it was quite important for the researcher to ascertain from the start whether the instructor followed the methodology prescribed for report writing in the course. For this purpose, small discussions were held with the course instructor to both understand and define her goals and expectations in teaching a business communication course, as well as her approaches and practices in teaching writing.

The significance of this lies in the assumption that course outcome reflects its methodology, so for the results of the study to assist in any kinds of improvement to the Report Writing component, the methodology prescribed in the course should be adhered to as much as possible.

3.4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The study involved a preliminary investigation into target situation requirements for business reports. It specifically looked at student reports produced in line with what gatekeepers in a business organisation regard as an acceptable report. To obtain the necessary data, the following research instruments were utilized in the study:

1. Questionnaires
2. Semi-structured interviews
3. Documents (Reports and Scales for Marking)

Case studies on their own do not specify any one particular technique of eliciting data but there are priorities and preferences (McDonough, 1997). According to McDonough, researchers like Cohen and Manion (1989), for example, find observational methods central to the case study whereas Stake (1995) believes that the interview is the main instrument necessary to discover and portray the 'multiple views of the case'. The research instruments utilized in this study were chosen after considering the purpose of the study, its focus as well as the researcher's access to available resources. For example, although naturalistic and descriptive observation may be typical of many case studies, it was not utilized as a research instrument in this study because the researcher was not granted the permission to do so in the selected business organisation. Also, as the focus of the study was on student outcome and whether it met with target situation requirements, class observations; which would otherwise have been essential in actual course evaluation or in investigating students' writing processes; were deemed unnecessary in answering the research questions.

3.4.1 Questionnaire

Three types of questionnaires were drawn up: Employer Questionnaire, Teacher Questionnaire and Student Questionnaire. There were a number of reasons for using the questionnaire as a data-gathering instrument. Lesikar and Pettit Jr. (1995) find a survey/questionnaire useful on the premise that 'you can best determine certain types of information by asking questions'. Such information includes personal data, opinions and evaluation, all of which were necessary in the study.

A more important consideration for using questionnaires had to do with the fact that the information needed can be obtained in a more controlled and accurate way. McDonough (1997) states that in questionnaires, 'the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions, therefore (they) afford a good deal of precision and clarity' (1997: 170). This is important because in the absence of an objective measure to assess the degree of success with which student subjects perform the report writing task in the study, the questionnaire would be capable of accessing feedback on student performance in a controlled, more uniformed and organized manner.

In terms of the results of the questionnaire, the results '....can best array differences in practice across different rhetorical communities' (Couture et.al., in Odell & Goswami, 1985). The researcher found this to be an important point to consider in her study especially in her attempt to document different individual's subjective opinions on the standards existing for reports, subjective evaluation of the reports and varying feedback on course improvement.

3.4.1.1 Employer Questionnaire

The Employer Questionnaire consisted of two sets. The first set labeled as Q1 (see Appendix B) was conducted at the beginning of the study and the second one labeled as Q2 (Appendix C), which is in a form of an 'Editorial Worksheet' was conducted after the gatekeepers had completed their evaluation of the students' reports.

a) Questionnaire I (Q1)

The objectives of Q I were as follows:

1. To elicit relevant data about the respondents' personal and professional background.

2. To elicit data about the types of report writing activities in which they were involved in.

3. To elicit data on skills necessary for successful performance of report writing in the selected organisation.

The first part of the questionnaire (Section I) consisted of questions seeking demographic information such as position in the organisation, qualifications, length of service, present and past designations and job demands. The next section of the questionnaire (Section II) sought information on the employers/gatekeepers' report writing activities in the organisation. They were required to provide responses on the following aspects:

a. Types of reports relevant to their job
b. Frequency of report writing tasks

On the types of reports, the gatekeepers were asked to rank the types of reports provided in the questionnaire in order of the 'most relevant' to the 'least relevant'. An "other" category was also provided to allow for unanticipated responses. The question on frequency of report writing tasks required the gatekeepers to indicate the amount of time they devoted to a particular report writing activity. The category of responses provided in the questionnaire were piloted before use with one of the junior managers in the organization to determine whether the personnels there could identify with the descriptors used.

The last section of the questionnaire (Section III) contained questions that were most central to the research questions.They gauged the gatekeepers' opinion on the report writing skills found necessary in the organization with regard to the following points:

a. The importance of report writing skills
b. 'Acceptability' standards for an analytical report
c. Report writing performance of graduates

It was necessary to detemine whether report writing skills were important in the organisation because a positive reponse to this would indicate that the matters being considered in the study were worth pursuing (For ESP practitioners, on the other hand, the importance of report writing skills in a business organisation confirms the necessity of providing an ESP course with a report component to graduating business students).

The third question of this section asked for the gatekeepers' feedback on the criteria they found to be important in an analytical report. The researcher made use of a close-ended question form to elicit this information, requiring the respondents to tick a number of items from a list of suggested criteria for reports. Several researchers have pointed out the limitation in using close-ended questions to inquire about the writing skills used on the job. The argument is that the lists of important qualities may include only the items the researcher thinks are important (Anderson in Odell and Goswami, 1985). Although this may be true, the researcher felt that for non-linguists like the gatekeepers, it was necessary to provide these responses as clues or pointers to help lessen the demand made on their effort and time, if they were asked to classify the categories of responses themselves. In addition, closed form questions would ensure easier interpretation, tabulation and summary of answers for the researcher (Best & Kahn, 1989).

Nonetheless, to minimise any limitation in using the close-ended question form, an open-ended (question four) question form was provided for the gatekeepers to substantiate their responses in question three. It consisted of several open-ended items allowing the gatekeepers to write their views on the important characteristics or features of each of the criteria mentioned previously in question three. In this way, greater details could be obtained on actual features or characteristics of the reports expected in the workplace. Again, an additional category of "other" was included for the gatekeepers to write their own responses.

The last three questions sought the gatekeepers' opinion on fresh graduates' report writing performance, as well as problems associated with their reports. This particular topic was specifically addressed because the evaluation of the report was to be undertaken on the standpoint that the reports represent written work of would-be members of the discourse community. Thus, it was necessary to find out whether the standards set forth earlier applied to fresh graduates. If not, the feedback obtained on 'acceptability' standards for reports cannot be utilized in the gatekeepers' evaluation of the report at a later stage in the study.

b) Questionnaire 2 (Q2) – The Editorial Worksheet

The objectives of Q2 / Editorial Worksheet were as follows:

1. To elicit data on whether students' reports measured up to the criteria of an acceptable report.
2. To elicit data on possible reasons behind a mismatch, if any.
3. To gather respondents' opinions on possible areas of improvement in the reports

The term 'editorial worksheet' was coined from Hager (1992) who wrote on the importance for the management in business organisations to work with others in evaluating reports during various stages of the report writing process. This has to be done in order to determine the effectiveness of the document that is produced. The usual editorial worksheets consist of probing questions on many aspects of the report such as organization, readability, clarity of language, style, word choice and so forth.

The editorial worksheet adapted by the researcher consisted of one introductory page and four to five worksheets, depending on the number of reports evaluated. The introductory page contained a short introduction to the study outlining the rationale behind the evaluation of students' reports, some instructions to the evaluator, and a table in which grades on the reports were to be indicated. The instructions provided to the evaluators were as follows:

1. How many reports to read and evaluate.
2. How the grading of each report was to be done and the scale to be used.
3. A request for the evaluator to make revisionary comments on the report itself, as well as overall comments in the space provided in the worksheets attached.

To determine whether the reports were acceptable, the gatekeepers were asked to fill in their grades on the reports using a holistic scale of 1-6 (see section on Holistic Rating Scale). Reasons behind the reports' success or failure in meeting with the requirements as well as information on possible improvements to the reports were obtained from the gatekeepers' comments on both the reports and in the Editorial Worksheets provided.

3.4.1.2 Student and Teacher Questionnaires

Both the Student and Teacher Questionnaires were end of course questionnaires given for the main purpose of obtaining information on the Report Writing component of the course. The objectives of the two questionnaires were kept similar to allow for some comparison between students' and teacher's responses to aspects of the Report Writing component. The objectives of the questionnaires were as follows:

1. To elicit relevant data on respondent's background.
2. To elicit data concerning respondents' views on the Report Writing component.
3. To obtain data on the skills students have acquired in relation to report writing
4. To obtain data on student performance in the reports (teacher's only).

For the Student Questionnaire (Appendix D), information was sought on respondents' background including faculty, field of study/major, year of study, information on previous English courses taken at UKM and reasons for taking the ESP course. The corresponding section of the Teacher Questionnaire (Appendix E) included questions on length of service, years of teaching experience, academic and professional qualifications, previous and present ESP courses taught at UKM and reasons for teaching the English for Business course.

Data concerning respondents' views on the Report Writing component were divided into two. The first part (Section II of the questionnaires) consisted of questions on general issues associated with the component. These included questions on whether students benefitted from the course's Report Writing component, and how it was considered in relation to students' future profession. Answers in this section helped the researcher to gauge, in general, the perceived effectiveness of the course in providing the students with the necessary knowledge and skills in writing a business report.

The second part (Section IV of the questionnaires) came in the form of an overall evaluation of the Report Writing component, consisting of twenty four close-ended items relating to specific areas of the component. This section required respondents to respond on a five point scale on two to three statements regarding the following aspects:

- objective(s) and the contents of the Report Writing component
- time allocation
- student ability and improvement
- instructions/teacher's role
- materials inside and outside the classroom
- student assessment
- students' own view of learning in general, and, specifically, the preparation of the student for the workplace

The purpose of this section was to obtain, in gist, information on the strengths and weaknesses of the Report Writing component which could be used to identify factors behind students' performance in the report. For this purpose, one open-ended question was also included inviting the respondents to write their own viewpoints concerning any other areas of the Report Writing component worth looking into.

In sum, this particular section of the questionnaire provided the researcher with an opportunity to identify difficult or problematic areas as a basis for either course evaluation or improvement. Some of the areas covered in this section were looked at in previous sections. This was done on purpose so that there would be a way of rechecking respondents' answers for contradictions. The Likert scale was used for easier quantification of the responses.

Section III of the Student and Teacher Questionnaires focused on report writing skills taught in the course. It consisted of questions seeking respondents' opinion on the objective(s) of the Report Writing component and the report writing skills taught in the course. The questions on skills covered the following points:

- what specific skills were taught (A list of twenty skills were given to choose from. These skills were compiled from the course handout and reference books on report writing).
- other additional skills respondents found necessary in writing reports.
- which skills were found to be important.
- mastery of the skills taught.
- problematic areas/skills for students.

The feedback obtained in this particular section on objective and skills can be used to evaluate, in a qualitative way, the proportion of what (skills) has been learned from what has been taught/covered during the course. In terms of student performance in the report, one can speculate based on the responses the extent to which the Report Writing component, its content and focus facilitated their learning and writing of the reports.

3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Formal semi-structured interviews were carried out with all three categories of subjects. The interviews were utilized as a way of confirming information gathered in the questionnaires. They were also conducted for the purpose of triangulation, that is to obtain information which can be used to complement the questionnaire responses. As the questions asked were within the guidelines of the questionnaires, the interviews also allowed for an in-depth exploration of the respondents' answers.

The researcher chose the semi-structured interview type because she needed a format that is open, personalized and flexible, yet structured and controlled enough to ensure that the relevant knowledge or information to be covered are collected in all the different interviews. The semi-structured format has the advantage of a structured overall framework but with some flexibility within that, for example in changing the order of questions and for more extensive follow-up of responses (McDonough, 1997: 183).

3.4.2.1 Employers' Interview

Two sets of interviews were conducted with each of the two gatekeepers. A 'pre-interview' (Appendix F) was held at the beginning of the present study with each of the two gatekeepers for the purpose of obtaining the following information : 1) general information on report writing activities in the organisation (what types, by whom , how often and for what purposes, in which medium and why) and 2) specific information on how reports are assessed for approval within the organisation and basically what criteria constitute an acceptable report. Emphasis will be given to reports expected of fresh graduates. The criteria were compiled to be used as guides in the evaluation of students' reports.

A ' post interview' (Appendix G) was held at the end of the course with each of the gatekeepers to find out what they thought of the UKM students' reports. The interviews were carried out in reference to students' reports and the Editorial Worksheet completed by the gatekeepers in terms of whether the reports measured up to those criteria established earlier. In a way, these interviews can be described as analytical interviews because they focused on particular features of writing such as Content, Language, Organization, and so forth.

The overall framework of these two sets of interviews comprised a number of open-ended questions based on the responses in the questionnaire. These questions were supplemented by other subsidiary questions aimed at eliciting further responses on a particular topic such as in obtaining more examples, explanations and expansion of points. Radnor (1994) calls these extra questions 'pick ups', referring to information she wants to pick up on if the interviewee does not offer them in response to the open question.

3.4.2.2 Students and Teacher Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the students and the course instructor at the end of the course to obtain feedback on measures that need to be taken in improving the reports and the Report Writing component in general. The students' interviews (Appendix H) were conducted as a small group interview. This is because the students worked on and wrote the reports in groups making it necessary to carry out the interviews in that way so as to obtain a group's perspective on its collaborative writing experiences. The interviews were conducted for the following purposes:

- to clarify, confirm and probe responses in the Student Questionnaire.
- to obtain students' views on their performance in the report and some of their own ideas for improvement, if any.
- to show students the gatekeepers' opinion on areas of strengths and weaknesses in the report, as seen from a professional perspective. Implicit in this objective was the need to educate students on expectations held in the workplace with regard to written reports.

The class instructor was also interviewed for the same purpose of obtaining feedback on the reports and course improvement (Appendix I). However, in an attempt to provide a better picture of the students' writing performance, questions which sought the teacher's opinion on students' progress in writing were included. It was hoped that the kind of information gathered could help identify important areas to be looked at in the teaching and writing of business reports. The teacher's interview focused on the following points:

- students' progress in writing the reports
- strengths and weaknesses in students' work
- teacher's opinion on possible improvements to the report

3.4.3 Document Analysis

Several documents were used in an attempt to study the students' reports. Documents are an important source of data in many investigations and document analysis serve a useful purpose in yielding information that is helpful in explaining and evaluating social or educational practices (Best & Kahn, 1989: 90). The following are the documents used in this study:

3.4.3.1 Student Reports

A total of nine business reports were available for evaluation. These reports were group reports written in response to a contextualized business topic/case. Despite being authentic in topic terms, these reports were written in ways and format prescribed for in the course. This is necessary so that the results in the study could be used as a means of exploring the teaching and writing of business reports in the course. Of the nine reports, five were written on Marketing topics, and thus were evaluated by GK 1. The other four were on Human Resource, and were evaluated by GK 2.

The report topics were determined by the gatekeepers. The topics were divided into three major categories (Appendix J). The first category of topics were on Marketing and the other two were on Human Resource. The choice of topics was quite convenient because GK 1 is senior manager of the Marketing department and GK 2 is senior manager of Administration. The categories of topics are as follows:

1. Market Research Survey
2. A Review of Corporate Planning Strategy
3. A Review of Performance Standards

Each of the category of topics consisted of three to four similar research areas. No changes were made by the researcher on the wordings of the topics. However, rubrics were provided so as to guide students on the purpose of the whole Report Writing exercise, as well as a simple guideline as impetus for writing (Appendix K).

Two variables were taken into account in the decision to employ gatekeepers as 'task setters'. They are 1) validity of task in the study, 2) assessment principles. Firstly, having the gatekeepers set the topics for the students ensured validity of task in the study. Bhatia (1993) argues for the notion of 'generic integrity' in relation to test tasks. It is stated that the success of any kinds of assessment procedures for ESP students lies in the selection of 'genuine, authentic and relevant' texts and tasks.

In the case of this study, the topics were taken as substitute for a test of students' report writing ability. A crucial element here is that the topics generated from target situations, that is from the workplace itself, and from the people responsible in producing and assigning reports. In many ways, the topics were both authentic and relevant, thus 'ensuring more accurate assessment of the learner's ability to operate in a specialist environment, giving the 'test tasks' a better predictive validity about the behaviour of the learner in relevant target situations' (1993: 199). In connection with this, establishing the relevance of the topics for both the students and the gatekeepers would ensure a better 'addressor-audience' relationship in the whole writing exercise (see Chapter II; page 53).

Secondly, gatekeepers' assignment of the report writing topics provided an appropriate context for the assessment (although a qualitative one) of writing because the topics required writing that students would encounter in the workplace. Huot (1996: 559) argues for a more contextualized kind of an assessment, saying that 'assessment must be context-based. Assessment practices need to be based upon the notion that we are attempting to assess a writer's ability to communicate within a particular context and to a specific audience who needs to read this writing as part of a clearly defined communicative event'. The instructor/assessor is responsible in 'building a context in which writing can be drafted, read and evaluated'.

The researcher is confident that Huot's views on assessment can provide the rationale for using organisation specific topics and business professionals as assessor in this study.

3.4.3.2 Holistic Rating Scale

A holistic rating scale was used to determine the gatekeepers' opinion of the students' reports. The overall purpose of the scale was to see whether the gatekeepers found the reports acceptable by their standards. These standards were in relation to the 'acceptability' criteria for reports that they had set forth earlier on in the study. The scale, which was adapted from Wong's (1993) Scale for General English Proficiency and Writing Ability for Academic Potential, will indicate whether students' reports measured up to the criteria of an 'acceptable' report. The scale is as follows:

6 – Clearly more than acceptable

5 – Possibly more than acceptable. Meets the requirements of an analytical report

4 – Acceptable. Functional for the designated audience

3 – Possibly not acceptable

2 – Not acceptable. Cannot be relied on for organisational decision making or support

1 – Clearly not acceptable. Far below the standards expected of an analytical report

A holistic scale was used because experts recommend this kind of a scoring procedure for the assessment of writing (Odell, 1981 cited in Varner & Pomerenke, 1998). In addition, it is also not reasonable to expect non-linguists to use the full range of linguistic categories usually expected of from language teachers. Therefore, the scale used in this study was appropriate for the gatekeepers, in their capacity as 'laypeople', in rating the students' reports without undue demand on their part.

3.4.3.3 'Acceptability' Criteria Rating List

The gatekeepers' feedback on the criteria of 'acceptability' for reports obtained from (Q1) and the pre-interview were compiled to be used with the holistic rating scale, as guides in the evaluation of students' reports (see results; pages 134 and 145).

3.5 METHOD OF STUDY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis in this study can be divided into four main stages. They are as follows:

Stage 1	-	Gaining access to the workplace and classroom
	-	Assignment of Report Writing topics
Stage 2	-	Data elicitation on 'acceptability' standards for reports Instruments used: pre-questionnaire and interview
	-	Analysis of responses to tabulate and arrange specific criteria of an acceptable report for use in the evaluation of reports
Stage 3	-	Evaluation of reports and feedback Instruments used: reports, editorial worksheet and interview
	-	Analysis of responses to see whether students' reports measured up to the criteria.
Stage 4	-	Data elicitation on improvement areas in reports and the Report Writing component Instruments used: post questionnaires and interviews
	-	Analysis of responses to obtain the gatekeepers', course instructor's and students' viewpoints on improvement areas in reports.

3.5.1 Stage 1

Upon obtaining agreement and approval from relevant individuals in the organisation, a request was made that the gatekeepers assign to students report writing topics of those commonly researched and written upon in the organisation. In obtaining the preferred topics, and at the same time guard against major deviation from the ESP course and its methodology, the researcher provided the following information to the gatekeepers:

1. The aims of the ESP course and the Report Writing component of the course.
2. Various samples of report topics commonly assigned to students/written by students, that were taken from a collection of past years topics and business texts to give an idea of the scope of the report writing assignments in the course.
3. Some general information on the approach and methodology of the Report Writing component to give the gatekeepers some idea concerning the writing process that the students at UKM go through.
4. The time frame in which to write the report (as specified in the course), and a general description of the student population.
5. The aims and objectives of the study stated in formal terms, emphasizing specifically its intention to minimise the gap and establish some essential link between theory (the academia) and practice (workplace).

The topics eventually provided by the gatekeepers, however, consisted of topics that revolved around general lines of enquiry within the online service-related industries (see Appendix J; Report Writing topics) rather than those which dealt with concerns or problems specific to the organisation. Two reasons were given concerning the particular selection of topics. The first had to do with the need to maintain confidentiality, in that a topic or a business case that is specific to organisational problems or issues would require students to investigate into areas which the organisation was not willing to disclose.

Another reason given was that topics dealing with 'real' organisational problems are normally demanding in the level of knowledge and writing expected, thus requiring students to expend time and effort they possibly could not afford in the course. Taking these points into consideration, it is probably safer to say that the topics assigned to the students are those typical of issues or lines of questioning within the online service business community rather than those commonly written upon in the organisation specifically.

In a sense, providing topics/assignments of a lesser import in writing does not indicate that they are any less valid to the content of workplace writing. Dorn (1999) found from her survey and interview research with twenty five employees that the rhetorical situations which workplace writers typically face require less extraordinary, more mundane and standardized types of discourse (1999: 42). Therefore, such topics perhaps illustrate a more realistic workplace writing situation.

It is necessary at this point to say that a selection of topics was provided instead of just one single topic because the researcher did not want to deviate too much from the methodology of the course. It is understood that the course allowed students a free choice of topics to write for their reports, therefore to place restrictions on this, despite it allowing the researcher greater control over task variable, would not only intrude upon the running of the course but also would de-motivate the students.

In addition, there was also the need to safeguard the interest of the course by minimising any form of control. It must also be seen that the reports produced were reflective of whatever methodology was prescribed for the course. It is for these reasons that students were allowed to select their topics of interest (but within the confines of the prescribed areas of research). Perhaps, these choices in topics and research areas for writing reports would allow for more issues to arise and to be discussed in relation to standards expected in various forms of analytical reports. Nonetheless, the researcher made sure that those areas of research under a specified topic category were very similar to one another in order to control for extreme variations.

To add to this last point, differences in topics or subject matter in the tasks may be acceptable on the grounds that what is important is in the communicative purpose of the genre. In this case, the genre is an analytical report, therefore so long as students reports fulfilled the communicative purpose of an analytical report, the cognitive structures in it and the use of grammatical resources, basic differences in the tasks would be taken care of (Bhatia, 1993).

3.5.2 Stage 2

A questionnaire was administered to both GK 1 and GK 2 to obtain information on standards they found acceptable for an analytical report. The questionnaire was personally administered by the researcher so that there was opportunity for her to re-explain the purpose of the study, the purpose of the questionnaire as well as to provide assurances of confidentiality. The researcher also took the time to go through the questions with the gatekeepers, providing comprehension checks wherever possible. By adopting this kind of a personalized approach, the researcher was able to gauge the gatekeepers' initial response to the questionniare and took steps to maximize her chances of getting the desired information.

An interview was conducted each with the two gatekeepers after completion of the questionnaire, and the responses looked at. A written outline of the interview was devised, which contained a list of open questions to ask, comments to put forward and topics to probe or 'pick up' on (see Radnor, 1994). This outline provided the researcher with a systematic way to bring out the necessary responses from gatekeepers. However, the two interviews differed at certain points in terms of the way questions were worded and areas probed upon. This was due to the gatekeepers' offhand remarks that led to some unexpected line of enquiry.

Each interview lasted about one to two hours starting firstly with a briefing and explanation then moving on to the questioning. The briefing involved an explanation on the purpose of the interview, the procedure involved, an indication of how the data was going to be used and the length of time the whole interview would take. Permission was also sought to audiotape the interview, explaining to the gatekeepers reasons for doing so. Audiotaping allowed the researcher to capture the words of the interviewees, without having to take down excessive notes that could result in incomplete recording of information. It is in fact the case that writing during the interview could be 'distracting to both interviewer and subject' (Best & Kahn, 1989), hence, audio recording is more convenient.

Data analysis at this stage in the study was aimed at obtaining information on the standards associated with the written analytical report. This involved identifying specific criteria looked for in a report so that they can be recorded and arranged for use in the evaluation of reports. To achieve this, the questionnaire responses were tabulated and arranged. Some of the characteristics/criteria of a report were obtained directly from the responses in the questionnaire and some were obtained, from responses to the open-ended questions, by grouping similar responses into categories.

Both sets of interview with the gatekeepers were audiotaped and transcribed (Appendix L). The interview data revealed a much richer and interesting account of expectations held in the workplace with regard to written reports. However, in keeping with the research questions in the study, only information pertaining to characteristics of a business report was analysed. In addition, both the gatekeepers' responses were treated separately. This is because GK 1 stated that his responses given in the questionnaire and the interviews were not totally representative of the organisation. Nonetheless, the researcher is confident that his responses were reflective of his knowledge and experience of report writing in the organisation. This is based on the fact that GK 1 spent a substantial amount of time on report writing activities. In addition, his organisational responsibilities (that of managerial position) provided him with a good knowledge of the expectations pertaining to reports.

The interview transcriptions were analysed qualitatively by looking for themes or topics which were consistent with the information revealed in the questionnaire. As the questions asked were within the guidelines of the questionnaire, the interview data served to corroborate information obtained in the questionnaire as well as provided a better understanding of the standards gatekeepers found acceptable for reports and the criteria looked for.

The topics gathered from the raw interview data were then developed into categories (which emerged from the data) containing a list of criteria/features looked for in an analytical report. Lastly, this list was organized and condensed into an 'Acceptability' Criteria Rating List to be used in the gatekeepers' evaluation of the reports.

3.5.3 Stage 3

Stage 3 of data analysis in this study determined whether the business reports written by students measured up to the 'acceptability' criteria for analytical reports. Nine reports were obtained for this purpose, and were studied at some length by the gatekeepers and evaluated upon based on each gatekeeper's expectation of a report written by fresh graduates. This stage of the study can be divided up further into three phases. They are 1) Holistic rating of the reports, 2) Analysis of the reports, noting areas of strengths and weaknesses and 3) Feedback on improvement.

In holistic rating of the students' reports, each of the gatekeepers were required to study and evaluate the reports written in their field, and make a single holistic judgement concerning the 'acceptability' of the reports. In making their decision, the gatekeepers were asked to consider the 'acceptability' criteria they had set forth earlier on. A holistic rating scale and a list of 'acceptability' criteria were provided for the gatekeepers to work on.

It needs to be pointed out here that rater agreement between the two gatekeepers was not previously established. Although this may be a weakness, the researcher believes that it may not be too detrimental to the study. Varner and Pomerenke (1999: 86) citing Huot (1990) states that 'rater agreement is not crucial because all raters bring their own backgrounds to the scoring and raters have different abilities'. In addition, ' determining interrater reliability is an option because in business, no two managers evaluate a report by a subordinate in exactly the same way. There are always going to be some differences. The important thing is that the assessment should be tailored to a specific school and a specific course'.

3.5.4 Stage 4

Stage 4 of the data analysis determined the areas to be improved in the report. The gatekeepers' feedback on this were obtained from Q2/Editorial Worksheet and the post interview. The post interview was audiotaped and transcribed (Appendix M). The data was analysed according to a procedure used by Odell & Goswami in 1982 (in Odell and Goswami, 1985) to determine judgements about choices of content in written documents. The procedure involves analysing written documents and identifying points at which the writer has made changes (either by elaborating or deleting) to the content. This procedure was adapted in studying the students' reports by getting the gatekeepers to analyse the reports and provide justifications on why they had chosen to accept the reports or reject them.

The course instructor's and students' ideas on improvement to the report were obtained from the post interview. Their points on improvement were noted. The students' and instructor's interviews were audiotaped but only for the purpose of lending support to the researcher's notes. This stage of data analyses provided some kind of a consolidation to the study so that tentative conclusions can be drawn concerning student performance and the extent to which the writing instruction has worked.

3.6 SUMMARY

To summarise, this chapter looked at the research methodology employed in this study. The research design in the study was mainly qualitative. It seemed to be an appropriate approach as the study was undertaken to obtain a preliminary understanding of target situation requirements and standards for written reports. There was no predetermined criteria or a set standard, therefore, a qualitative approach to research design allowed the researcher to explore and understand, from the perspectives of employers, what these requirements were. The case study method, in turn, allowed for an in-depth investigation to be carried out on a small sample population, yet provided insights that were readily applicable for teachers/classroom use.

Data collection involved several steps. In general, these included gaining access to the selected organisation and the ESP classroom. The next step was to assign students with the report writing topics designed by the gatekeepers. Interviews and discussions with the gatekeepers followed after that to obtain the relevant information on criteria for reports. The reports were then evaluated by the gatekeepers followed by interviews and discussions with the gatekeepers, students and course instructor on the reports as well as possible improvements that can be made to them.

The research instruments in this study made use of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis which consisted of students' reports and scales for marking, including the 'Acceptability' Criteria Rating List devised in the course of the study. These instruments had been chosen after considering the purpose of the study, its focus and the researchers' access to available resources. These instruments also allowed for some triangulation of data , in that the interview data could be used to confirm the information obtained in the questionnaire. To add to this, the gatekeepers' feedback obtained on the reports could be used to confirm/reflect upon the questionnaire and interview findings regarding the expectations held by the gatekeepers with regard to written analytical reports.

The data obtained in the study were qualitatively analysed by looking for themes and categories . Data analysis was carried out in several stages; the first stage was aimed at obtaining information on the standards for reports, the second stage was aimed at determining whether these criteria had been met and the third stage was aimed at identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses in the reports, and thus possible improvements that can be made to them. The results obtained would hopefully provide good insights on ways to refine the Report Writing component in the English for Business course at UKM.