CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0   Introduction

The main objective of this study is to provide evidence for the feasibility of using class blogs as an alternative form of assessment in Malaysian ESL courses. This aim is based on Carl Rogers' Humanistic approach to language learning. In fulfilling this aim, objectives have been set out and research questions were formulated. Relevant literature on second language acquisition and language assessment has been reviewed. In this chapter, theories on relevant language learning research methods which served as the basis for guiding the construction of the research framework are discussed.

The main portion of the data was gathered in a format that would enable the application of qualitative analysis procedures. Other parts of the data were analysed by applying the basic quantitative procedures. The following sub-sections will explicate the methodology and the rationale for employing the theoretical framework, participants, research tools, data collection procedures, and data processing procedures. Ethical considerations will also be elucidated.

3.1   Theoretical Framework

This study employed Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory of Language Learning as its theoretical framework. The investigation focused on the perceptions of Malaysian ESL students and educators on the feasibility of using class blogs as a way of assessing and giving feedback in ESL courses. The use of the Humanistic theory is relevant because the

participants' responses on the issue would inevitably reflect their understanding of effective language learning and assessment. As explained earlier, one of the aims of education and Humanistic ESL education are parallel, i.e. to produce wholesome and active language learners. Humanistic approach also highlights affective factors, such as motivation, non-threatening environments, self identities, and wholesome relationships with others. These aspects form the basis and themes for analyzing the participants' responses.

Also, the use of the Humanistic theory of language learning does not mean that this is a conclusive theory that could be used to explain all ESL education settings. As explained in the earlier chapter, the humanistic theory may not be able to explain certain ESL learning experiences and that other theories might be needed to conceptualise the issues. This concern was also formed as one of the themes that helped to address the research questions.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study consist of Malaysian university ESL educators and students (undergraduates); half of whom have used class blogs in their English courses and another half have never used or had any exposure to class blogs in their ESL lessons. The details of the participants and their selection criteria are explicated in the following sub-sections:

3.2.1 Participants for Questionnaires

The participants who participated in the questionnaire-completion method are categorized into four groups:

(i)   20 Malaysian university ESL students (undergraduates) who have used class blogs in English courses.

(ii)   20 Malaysian university ESL students (undergraduates) who have not used class blogs in English courses.

(iii)   10 Malaysian university ESL educators who have used class blogs in English courses.

(iv)   10 Malaysian university ESL educators who have not used class blogs in English courses.

The criteria set for the above sample selection are exemplified as follows:

➤ Participants from groups (i) and (iii) were:

• sourced from the currently available class blogs on the Internet. The teachers who set them up were requested to distribute a different set of questionnaires (will be explained in Section 3.3) to their respective ESL students.

• standardized in terms of their background, i.e. they were all from the same Malaysian public university. This is the only university found to have officially included class blogs as a form of learning and assessment in the ESL courses.

➤ Participants from groups (ii) and (iv), on the other hand, were:

• randomly selected from various programmes at various tertiary institutions in Malaysia.

In groups (ii) and (iv), the tertiary institutions that the students and/or educators come from were first determined, in an attempt to get participants from as varied tertiary institutions as possible. The teacher participants were also carefully selected so that they were varied in terms of their teaching experience and areas of specialization. This is to enhance the reliability of this study, so that the findings are not only exclusive for educators in certain fields.

Only students and educators from tertiary institutions were selected for this research. This is because compared to school teachers, for example, practitioners at the tertiary level usually have more freedom in the choice of assessments in the English subjects or courses. School teachers are usually very much tied down by what has already been determined by the Ministry of Education. It was also ensured that all of the above participants must have at least basic understanding of blogs. Only willing participants were selected as only such respondents would be able to provide honest and valuable data for this study. The inevitable limitation, however, is that their responses might be more favourable than unwilling participants. Since this factor might have a bearing on the findings, the data must be carefully analysed. To maintain their anonymity, all the 60 participants for questionnaires were not referred to by their real names, but only referred to by the group they belonged to, and whether they are from public or private institutions. It is a part of the study's investigation to know whether the public-private dichotomy has a determining role in affecting the participants' perceptions on the issue concerned.

3.2.2   Participants for Interviews

Ten (10) Malaysian ESL university educators were selected as participants for this research instrument:

(i) Five (5) were those who have used class blogs in their ESL classes

(ii) Five (5) were the ones who have never tried integrating class blogs as a part of their teaching, learning, and/or assessment procedures in their ESL classes.

Group (i) consisted of educators from the same Malaysian public tertiary institution. In Group (ii), however, there was a mix of educators from both public and private tertiary institutions, i.e. 3 from public universities and 2 from private universities. The numbers

here do not have to be equal because the public-private dichotomy was not the aspect being looked at in the analysis of the interviews.

3.3   The Research Tools

Two research instruments were employed in achieving this study's research objectives: questionnaires; and structured/semi-structured interviews.

3.3.1   Questionnaires

Questionnaires were the main instrument used in this study. This instrument made it possible to collect structured data from different groups of participants. The questionnaires sought to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data in order to answer the research question. For this purpose, there were four different sets of questionnaires, prepared and distributed to the different groups of participants as shown in Section 3.2.1. These sets comprise items of similar issues but each set was paraphrased to cater to the respondents' differing contexts, i.e. whether they were educators or students; or whether they have used class blogs before or not. Different perceptions of the different groups of participants could be deciphered and contrasted this way. One sample of the questionnaire was piloted, but no changes were made since the participant indicated that the questions were clear. Samples of the questionnaires can be seen in Appendices 1A, 1B, 1C and 1D.

The first part of the questionnaires consisted of general questions on the various aspects of a blog. The data obtained here were quantified manually into percentages, so that the aspects of blogs that were highly or least valued by the different groups of participants could be tabulated. The second part of the questionnaires mainly comprised open-ended questions, which required the participants to elaborate on their responses.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Structured or semi-structured interviews with selected Malaysian ESL university educators were also conducted. This was to obtain further responses from them on the feasibility of using class blogs as assessment tools in ESL courses. Through the interviews, more detailed responses were obtained, which helped to provide a more comprehensive picture of the issue. There were two interview schedules prepared, to cater to the two different groups of interviewees. Referring to Section 3.2.2, Interview Schedule 1 (Appendix 2A) was devised for group (i) and Interview Schedule 2 (Appendix 2B) was prepared for group (ii). There were 19 interview items in each interview schedule. The interviews were semi-structured, i.e. they were guided by a predetermined set of interview schedules, but sub-questions were asked, where appropriate. Interview Schedule 1 was piloted with a participant, but no changes were made since the participant said that the questions were appropriate and clear.

Overall, the two research tools above were suitable, based on the information required of the research questions and objectives. The combination of quantitative and qualitative-based methods was appropriate and ensures the validity of this study as a whole. This study also aims to obtain data from educators and students of different tertiary institutions. These two factors suggest that the research's validity and reliability limitations, that may inevitably arise, were addressed. More emphasis on qualitative data was justified as this study is primarily based on the perceptions of the respondents.

3.4   The Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures involved face-to-face and on-line communication with the participants.

3.4.1   Data Collection for Questionnaires

The questionnaires were mostly distributed personally to the participants. A few sets, however, were e-mailed to students who were afar. There were given a maximum of two weeks to return the questionnaires. Participants' queries were attended to and clarified, as needed.

3.4.2   Data Collection for Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were done semi-formally; some through instant messenger (e.g. MSN Messenger) and some through e-mails. Virtual interviews also allowed the interviewees to take their time to respond accordingly. Interviewees might be more open to provide their honest perceptions on the issue since it was not conducted face-to-face. This method also provided a ready record of the interviews as it did not have to be transcribed. It was a much more practical procedure that lessened the burden of both the interviewer and interviewee since a meet-up was not needed. This procedure also assisted the data analysis procedures. The virtual interview sessions only needed to be saved in a document on the computer and printed out for analysis. It was felt that a recorded interview was unnecessary and redundant, especially when the discourse features of the interview were not important.

The initial plan was to collect all of the data for interviews only through one standardized method, i.e. instant messenger, since it is easier to probe the interviewees to further elaborate and clarify their responses. Due to practical reasons, however, some of the interviewees personally requested to respond to the interview items through e-mails. Many

were busy and did not have time to spend on the virtual interview that would basically take about two hours to complete.

3.5   Data Analysis Procedures

The data was rendered into a form that would allow for both quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures.

3.5.1   Data Analysis for Questionnaires

The data obtained were analysed according to the questionnaire items, and the themes that emerged, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The data obtained from the first part of the questionnaires were analysed quantitatively, i.e. they were quantified manually into percentages. For example, if 5 out of 20 respondents from Group (i) indicated that they really liked the aspect of 'flexible layout choices' for blogs, it would be reported that:

5/20 x 100 = 25%

25% of Group (i) respondents really liked the 'flexible layout choices' feature of blogs.

This percentage will then be compared to other features of blogs, as indicated in the questionnaires and be cross-analysed with the results yielded from the other three groups of respondents. These data were presented in the form of tables for easy understanding. Qualitative conclusion was then drawn from the quantitative analysis.

For Part B of the questionnaires, the data were also quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. The 'Yes/No' items were quantified into percentages, and the reasons given for each item were qualitatively analysed according to the relevant themes related to the Humanistic approach to language learning. The results here were also cross-analysed with

those of respondents from other groups. Also, the types of institutions the respondents were in (e.g. public or private institutions) were also used as a salient variable.

3.5.2 Data Analysis for Semi-Structured Interviews

The data obtained here were purely qualitative. The data were categorized according to a number of themes related to the Humanistic approach to language learning such as: Blogs and ESL classrooms; Class Blogs and ESL Skills; Class Blogs as a Form of Assessment; Class Blogs and the Humanistic Approach to Language Learning; Non-threatening Learning and Assessment Environments; Class Blogs and Motivation; Power of Feedback; Active, Collaborative and Autonomous Learning (Peer- and Self- Assessments); and Assessment for Life-long Learning

The results here were also cross-analysed across different groups of respondents and the type of institutions they were teaching in (public or private universities) to see if there were any patterns indicating similarities and differences. Where appropriate, the results were presented in the form of tables and figures.

The in-depth inquiry should make up for the small sample size of this study. It must be noted that the analysis of this study focused only on the respondents' perceptions, and not on the efficacy of using class blogs in the ESL classrooms or as a language assessment tool.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations being taken into account in carrying out this study are as follows:

a) The privacy of the respondents was maintained throughout the whole study.

b) The data obtained were ensured to not harm any other individuals or groups.

c) It was made clear when the questionnaires were distributed and at the beginning of each interview that no one was forced to participate in this study and that they can withdraw from participating at any time. The participants' signatures on the questionnaires and the their positive replies when approached to be interviewees (face-to-face/phone calls/emails) were taken as consent that the participants consented to be the participants of this study.

d) Anonymity of the participants for both of the research tools was ensured.

e) The data obtained from both the research instruments were to be used only for research purposes. This was made clear in all sets of questionnaires and at the beginning of each interview.

f) Data were not deceptive and not to be manipulated, i.e. the findings would be reported as is. No traces of commission were traced along the study's process. Transcripts of the interviews are available upon request.

These principles are truly important to guide certain decisions about this study's design and framework.

3.7 Summary

The methodology employed, encompassing the data collection and data analysis procedures, had been based on the objectives and research questions of this study as stated in Chapter One. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two has helped in determining the theoretical framework and the appropriate procedures to be used in ensuring that the research questions were addressed. Ethical considerations were also given particular emphasis in this study. The following chapter will explicate how the data were analysed and the findings and insights obtained from the analysis.