CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide descriptions of the steps taken by the researcher to carry out the study identifying the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel. The methodology employed aimed at gathering the necessary data to make informed analysis of their communicative needs, the problems faced by the staff and the possible steps available for them to improve their quality of communication at their workplace. It covers in detail the necessary information pertaining to the target group, the research design, the method of data collection and the statistical techniques used by the researcher.

3.2 Overview of the target group (the Front Office staff)

The target group for this study is the staff of the Front Office department of the hotel. There are of fifty-two (52) staff headed by the Front Office Manager, the Assistant Front Office Manager and four Assistant Managers. The Front Office department comprises three sections namely the Front Desk (25 staff), the telephone department (9 staff) and the uniformed staff (18 staff). The telephone department and the uniformed staff department have their own section-heads who report to the Front Office manager. The Front Office staff are deemed suitable for this study because;

a) they share the same responsibility in the sense that they are from the same Front Office department.

b) they have studied Elementary General English for some years.

c) they need ESP for their work related purposes.

d) they are experienced members of the workforce.

The above criteria are in line with Robinson's (1991) definition of ESP subjects. They are authentic subjects for this study because their language needs may differ from one another. Another reason is that the respondents' qualifications also differ - some are from secondary level and some are with college diplomas and degrees. Therefore, this will enable the study to cover a wider area with regards to the four language skills.

3.2.1 The target group (Front Office staff)

The fifty-two (52) staff of the Front Office department of Eastin hotel comprises the three main ethnic groups of the Malaysian population, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Their academic qualifications range from the PMR (Penilian Menengah Rendah) to a Degree in Hospitality. Their age groups range from late teens to early forties and they have a fairly varied years of experience in their present positions in the Front Office department. Details of their backgrounds and working experiences will be discussed more extensively later in this study.

The department is headed by a Front Office Manager (FOM), and an Assistant Front Office Manager (AFOM). The Front Office department comprised of three sections;

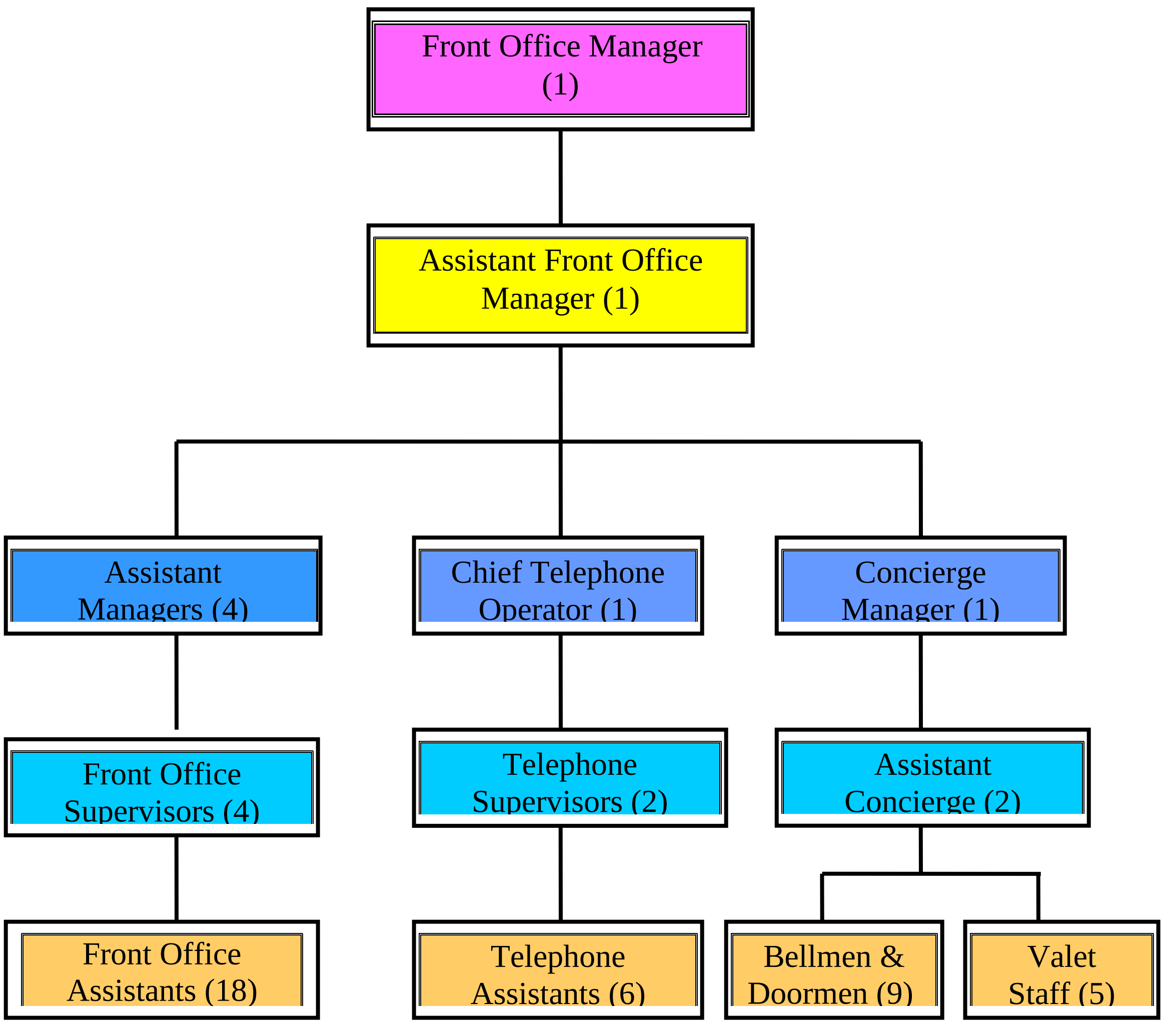
(i) the Front Desk (26 staff),

(ii) the telephone department (9 staff), and

(iii) the uniformed department (17 staff).

The following organisational chart explains the customary positions of the Front Office staff of the hotel being studied.

Diagram 2. Organisational chart of Front Office Department



3.2.1.1 Overview of the Front Desk staff

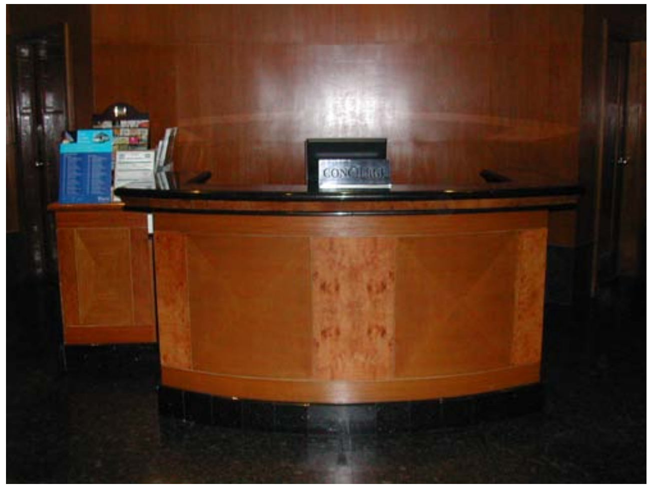
There are twenty-six (26) staff operating the Front Desk. The basic duties of the Front Desk staff are; greeting the guests, performing guest check-in and registration, selecting and assigning guest rooms, attending to rooms enquiries, establishing credit and method of payment, opening, posting and closing guests' accounts, cashing travellers' cheques, dealing with foreign currency, checking-out guests, attending to guests' needs, handling complaints and providing specific advice and suggestions apart from ensuring quality service to the guests at all times.

The Front Desk staff comprises the three main ethnic groups of the Malaysian population, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians. From this section, details of their biodata were obtained and plotted in a graph and table form for easy reference and ease of analysing. The said data will give the researcher an idea of the respondents English language qualification, their age groups, their gender, marital status, ethnicity and also their years of experience in their present positions. From these data, we are able to obtain some ideas regarding the similarities and differences pertaining to their language proficiency and whether their marital status does affect their time available for language training programmes which will be discussed later in the chapter.

3.2.1.2 Overview of the Telephone Department

The telephone department (9 staff) controls the telecommunication system of the hotel. It is an important tool of communication and it is responsible for handling all the incoming and outgoing calls of the hotel. Giving wake-up calls to guests, placing room service orders, answering queries on reservation and taking reservations are all performed routinely by the telephone department. Besides that, the department is also responsible for printing all the messages which will be passed on to the uniform services for distribution. As such, the staff needs to be able to communicate well to handle the calls effectively and quickly. Therefore, for the staff of this section, their listening and speaking proficiencies are their main priorities.

3.2.1.3 Overview of the Concierge Department (uniformed staff)



The Concierge department is the uniformed service staff (17 staff) which is also known as the customer service department. They comprise the concierge staff, the bell staff, the valet service staff and the doorpersons. The staff are responsible for a myriad of services such as greeting the guests, carrying their luggage, escorting guests to their rooms, delivering messages and newspapers, providing information regarding the hotel's facilities, arranging guests' transportations, making or changing airlines bookings, assisting arriving and departing guests at the *porte cochere* (covered arrival area) and also parking and retrieving guests' vehicles et cetera.

3.3 Research Design

According to Nunan (1992 : 211), "research is a systematic process of enquiry consisting of the use of a variety of methods to collect data." As such, for this study, the collection of data is based on a few methods and is generally guided by the following guidelines;

Why is there a need to carry out the study?

What are the areas to be evaluated?

Which instruments are employed for the evaluation?

Who are the target population?

How are the information gathered and analysed? and,

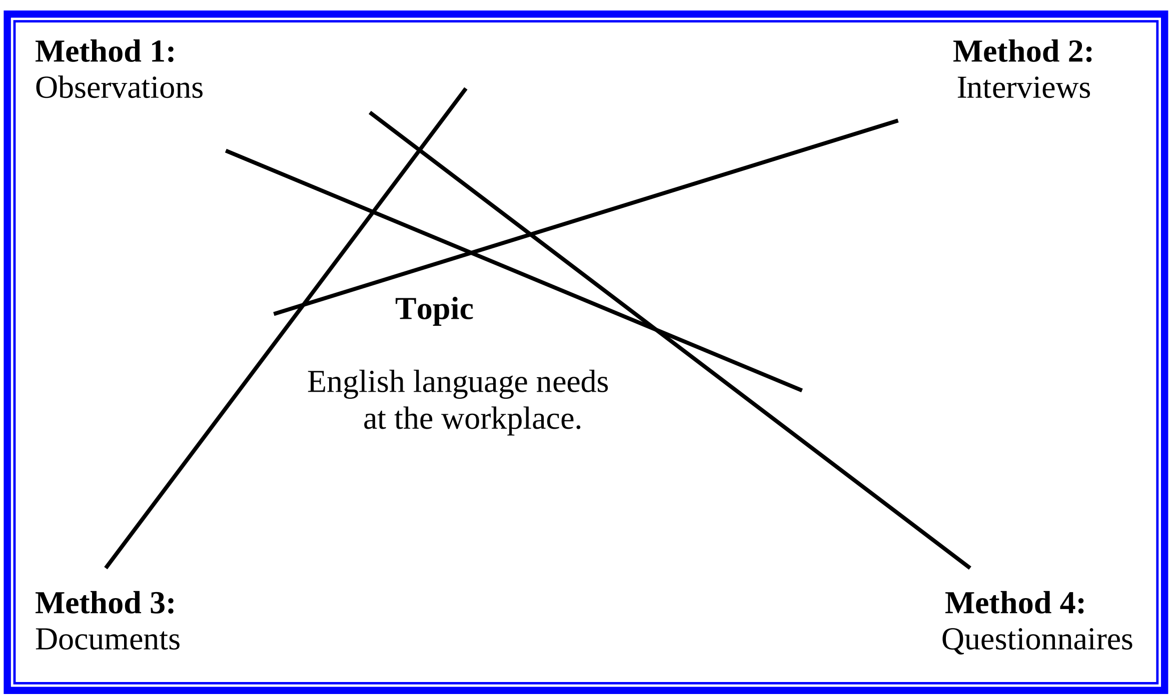
What are the recommendations and conclusion?

The research design sought to determine and support the research questions pertaining to why there is a need to carry out the evaluation of the English language needs of Front Office staff of a business class hotel. It is also conducted to determine the communicative proficiency of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) that are necessary for use by the different categories of the Front Office staff. The study also cover the areas pertaining to the communicative skills necessary for their daily job tasks, their perceived attitudes, their language needs and problems, the target population being studied and the overall findings of the study.

The needs that were examined were based on factors related to their level of education, their ethnicity, their attitude under different work situations, their language proficiency level and other related language requirements according to their positions in the Front Office department of the hotel. The instrumentation employed by the researcher focuses on a number of methods used for gathering the relevant data to provide the findings.

For this study, the selected instruments employed for the evaluation of the English language needs of Front Office staff of a business class hotel would be a combination of questionnaire, observations, interviews and documentary research. The researcher believed that using multiple methods will help to generate more data from different angles and perspectives because the subjects being studied can be argued from different viewpoints. The four methods were used to collect data based on the analogy called "triangulation" which is often referred to by researchers (Denscombe, 1998 : 83-85). The above analogy can be better perceived by the simple diagram as illustrated below;

Diagram 3. <u>Methodological Triangulation</u>



3.3.1 Basis for choosing the combination of methods

Information gleaned from questionnaires and interviews tend to present only part of the individuals' views. The questionnaires and interviews are not totally able to gauge the interaction and communicative patterns of the respondents while they are at work. Hence, by observing the respondent daily as it really is in real life situations, helps to present a better overall real-life picture of the respondents' habits, attitudes, preferences and other related communicative actions. Therefore, the researcher believed that the combination of methods as in the above mentioned triangulation, will enable the collection of detailed data which would not be possible if only one method was employed. Hence, the basis for choosing a combination of methods is mainly because each of the methods has its own strengths and weaknesses. By combining the methods, they can complement each other because of the fact that there cannot be a perfect method to carry out a research in terms of its validity and reliability.

3.4 Research method

The researcher conducted this study for about six (6) months to investigate the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a Business class hotel. Permission was obtained from the management of the hotel to allow the fifty-two (52) staff (excluding the Front Office manager) from the Assistant Front Office manager to the doormen, to answer the questionnaire questions. The questionnaires were collected back on the same day that they were distributed to the respondents.

The individual and group interviews were later conducted with the fifty-two (52) staff of the Front Office department. For this study, both the questionnaire and the interviews were done in stages because not all the Front Office staff were available at the same time. As for the observation, it was carried out throughout the entire length of the study (six months) because of the need to observe the staff individually as well as collectively while they were at work.

3.5 Data collection methods

Studies cited in textbooks relating to questionnaires, observations, interviews and documentary research tend to vary from point to point. There are positive and negative arguments regarding the chosen methods whether used in isolation or in combination. For this study, the combination of the questionnaires, interviews and observations methods helped to provide the data necessary for corroboration of the findings. Consistencies of data obtained from the different methods lend support to the end results of the study.

3.5.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaire is an important tool for data collection because it is widely used by researchers. According to Denscombe (1998) there are many types of questionnaires and they vary enormously in terms of their purpose, size and appearance. For this study, the self-administered questionnaire and the group administered format were used.

For most of the staff (about 35 out of a total of 52), the self-administered format was used. The group-administered format were presented to a group of three to four staff assembled together at a time. The staff for the group-administered format were allowed to obtain help from one another mainly for the purpose of completing the whole questionnaire so that there will be no unanswered questions. This is in anticipation of the problem that staff that comprised of the lower rank and file category will not fully complete the whole questionnaire. All the fifty-two questionnaires given to the staff were collected back thus ensuring a relatively acceptable degree of response rate and minimum evaluation bias.

The questions posed were mainly closed-ended questions with some questions based on the four-point Likert-scale (1932). The Likert-scale type questions were used to obtain the degree of importance of the answers. However, a point to be noted was that the close-ended questions in the questionnaires might have been taken negatively and prevented the staff from cooperating more positively. It is because of its inability to allow a freer expression of opinions as compared to other methods. The routine of mechanically choosing the multiple choice answers in the questionnaires can tend to provide an inaccurate overall findings if the respondents do not express their views truthfully. This may be due to the fact that the questionnaires tend to offer little opportunity for the researcher to check the truthfulness of the answers given by the respondents. As such, the issue of reliability will tend to arise. Bearing that in mind, the questionnaire has been designed to be as straightforward and as simple as possible for the various categories of the Front Office staff.

3.5.1.1 Format of the questionnaires

As the staff qualifications and proficiency levels differ markedly from one another, the questionnaire was designed to be brief, simple and straightforward so that the staff would not encounter any major difficulties when answering the questionnaires items. It is divided into four sections for easy reference and to ease the analysis of the data in order to determine and identify the staff's needs and problems;

i) **Section A**

This section comprises of eight (8) questions that deal with the respondents' biodata and backgrounds. The collected data are meant to describe the Front Office workforce based on their ages, gender distribution, marital status, levels of English qualifications, work experiences and the number of years they have been employed in their current positions.

ii) **Section B**

This section deals with the respondents' perceptions of the English language. It consists of eleven (11) questions that aimed to identify their perceived attitudes towards the language. This is because a respondent who has negative views towards the language will not be motivated to improve himself/herself even if there are problems pertaining to their language competency.

iii) **Section C**

The aims of this section are to identify the necessity of the English language and the English language needs of the staff. It is to evaluate the English language needs pertaining to the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as grammar competency and vocabulary knowledge.

iv) **Section D**

This section consists of twelve (12) questions with one suggestion statement. It is to identify the language problems encountered by the respondents and subsequently, to gather their suggested ideas on how to improve their language competency. The data obtained could be used to suggest the appropriate steps needed to overcome the English language problems that they faced.

3.5.1.2 Observations

The observation method of data collection in this study is used to provide an in-depth description of the individual Front Office staff communicative proficiency and problems. It allows a degree of insight that would otherwise be lacking if only the questionnaire method is used because observation allows the researcher a distinct way of collecting data by being able to observe and record the events first hand. In other words, it enables the researcher to witness and record in real life situations what the staff did in the daily course of their work pertaining to their communicative patterns and problems.

The observations was carried out over a period of six (6) months by observing and recording the communicative activities of the individual staff, from the Assistant Managers right down to the doorpersons, while they were performing their daily job tasks. It helps to provide additional data as to whether the answers given by the respondents in the questionnaires and interviews reflect the accuracy of the findings that were gleaned earlier from the questionnaires and interviews.

To ensure that the recording of the data could be carried out in a systematic and quantitative manner, a simple observation checklist (Appendix 3) containing a list of the relevant language skills to be observed was used together with the field notes taking. Care was also taken to minimize the likelihood of disrupting or interrupting the events that were occurring by ensuring that the positioning of the researcher was unobtrusive.

3.5.1.3 Interviews

The interview method requires interpersonal skills of a high degree such as putting the respondents at ease and eliciting the desired information. It is not easy to administer and there are two (2) types of interviews namely exploratory and standardized (Banaka,1971). The former allows for an in-depth and free-style interview that can be conducted on a group basis. Due to time constraint, the face-to-face interviews were only conducted with a selected number of respondents. Respondents who were not involved in the individual interviews were grouped under the group interview to supplement the data gathered through the individual interviews.

This study employs the exploratory interview with the purpose of understanding how the respondents think, feel and react. The high response rate, the opportunity to correct misunderstandings and the guided questions for respondents with language difficulties help to complement the use of the questionnaire to collect data. The structured interview format (Appendix 2) was used to obtain additional information about the background of the respondents, their perceived attitudes towards the language, their communicative problems and their preferences and perceptions of the communicative needs.

The individual interview session was conducted after the administration of questionnaires to the staff. Each individual interview lasted about twenty to twenty-five minutes and the group interviews (about 4 to 6 staff) lasted about thirty to thirty-five minutes. The group interview helped to overcome some of the respondents' problems such as shyness, lack of self-confidence and lack of language competence.

3.6 Data analysis

Qualitative data are generally observations which do not involve numbers and statistics. Examples are data obtained through observations of staff meetings, diaries entries, interviews, conversations etc. It is useful to support the findings obtained through quantitative methods as stated by Willis (1962) and Patton (1980). Quantitative data on the other hand, involves numbers and statistics and as such, is easier to compile and analyse. Examples are the number of respondents, ranking of answers, biodata of respondents and others, that involve numbers (quantitative data analysis) as stated by Tuckman (1972) and Shavelson (1981).

The vast amount of raw data obtained through the various methods need to be compiled, coded, grouped and presented for easy reference. As such, the quantitative method of data analysis was preferred because of its ease of computation and respectability of the findings. The data collected through interviews and observations are interpreted in a descriptive manner but are analysed together with the data obtained through the questionnaire. For this study, the data were mostly compiled, coded and presented in the forms of graphs and tables because of the ease of summary and analysis. The "Statistical Package for Social Sciences Programme" (SPSS Version 14.0) statistical procedures was used only for simple cross-tabulation of data because the inclusion of too many complex analysis will tend to defeat the purpose of this study.

The tabulation of the data obtained through this study is to determine the most "typical" average value (mean). From the data gathered through the questionnaires given to the Front Office staff, the estimate range of values in percentages, will be used for representation through the use of charts and graphs even though the number of respondents involved can be said to be relatively small.

3.7 Presentation of data

The presentation of data was by means of the descriptive method based on the frequency counts, percentages and averages. Frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the staff attitudes based on the items in the questionnaire. The mean (average) analysis were employed to analyse the perceptions of the staff towards the English language.

The figures were then presented through the use of simple tables and graphs which are deemed to be sufficient to provide a clear and detailed explanatory results. As such, the researcher is of the opinion that it does not warrant the use of complicated statistical procedures. Using simple frequency count method, the data were tabulated and converted into percentages. The percentages obtained were presented statistically in the forms of simple and easy to understand tables and graphs.

The presentation of data using tables were used quite extensively in this study. This is because its use can help the readers to interpret the information to be conveyed in easy to digest forms without confusion. The used of tables to pass on the relevant information was simply because of its simplicity and flexibility, and was meant for the ease of interpretations and understanding.

3.8 Scoring

In this study, as stated earlier, the answers to the given items in the questionnaire are tabulated using simple frequency count to obtain the percentages and the averages. For section D of the questionnaire (Appendix 1, Items 1 – 10), the scoring of the items is based on the four-point scale commonly referred to as the Likert-scale (1932). The tabulation of the answers will result in an average score that represent the position and the preference of the individual towards an item in question. The resulting score will show the differences, the needs and the actions which are obvious (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980). All the non-responses from the questionnaire were entered as "0" value.

Items containing the four categories of responses namely; none, only sometimes, most of the time, all the time or no responses at all, are calculated based on frequencies count. The responses are assigned numerical values of 0 to 52 (total number of respondents). The numerical data thus obtained are then compared with other category of items as being higher or lower accordingly. This sort of data compilation is used together with the data obtained through observations and interviews. The resulting scores are converted into percentages and a few of the scores are also presented in the forms of graphs as well as tables.

An example of how the scores for the items are tabulated and analysed, is as shown in the table below;

Table 1 - Scoring

No	Responses	Numbers	Percentages
1	None (NO)	0	0
2	Only sometimes (OS)	2	3.9
3	Most of the time (MT)	31	59.6
4	All the time (AT)	19	36.5
5	No responses (NR)	0	0
	Total	52	100%

The scoring depended on whether a positive or negative response is required. The indicator for the competency and attitude of the employees towards the language depended on the question being either positive or negative. The highest possible score is 100% (n=52) and the lowest possible score is "0" (if all the staff choose not to response to the question). Thus, the average score is 50% and scores that are more than 50% are considered to be having a positive attitude whereas scores less than 50% are considered to be having a negative attitude.

3.9 Conclusion

In carrying out a study, it is quite common for any researchers to encounter problems of determining the most appropriate research design and methodology to be used. This present study is no exception. This chapter discussed the issue of the staff preferences of learning the English language and the importance of proficiency that is placed on the four language skills. The study aimed at gathering data from the staff and making informed decisions to improve the quality of their language proficiency.

This chapter also discussed some important related issues on the methodology used for obtaining the required data. The discussion of the research design and methodology in this chapter had provided detailed information regarding the major aspects of this study such as the conceptual framework, the subjects, the research instruments, data collection procedures and data analysis. It is hoped that the discussion has given a clear picture of how this study was carried out. In the following chapter (Chapter 4), the data gathered through the questionnaires and interviews will be analysed and presented with the help of tables and charts. The chapter (Chapter 4) will discuss the analysis of the data, and the findings of the study.