CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the design taken to enable the fruition of this study. The chapter consists of 8 sections. A section discussing the research design taken to generate data for analysis is given, followed by a section which will provide the background of the 10 participants involved, Another section will discuss the research tools used to extract data while the selection and administration of the three tasks designed to extract data is also described. The method of data collection is also given and the processes involved in making analysis as well as some problems encountered are also highlighted.

3.1 Research Design

This research uses a qualitative research method which will provide room for looking at the data driven research more descriptively. The reason for making this choice was based on the nature of the study itself which aims at showing the crux of the Chinese student's problem in attempting to use English as a means of communication as required by the tasks designed by the researcher. Patton (1985) claims that a qualitative research "is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions within". This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily. This study aims at looking at what strategies the Chinese students use in a communication tasks set for them and thus, the analysis strives for a depth of understanding their basic challenges and how they cope with these challenges. It is this characteristic of qualitative research which induced the researcher to adopt it in this study. It is believed that through a qualitative research, the researcher will be able to do an in-depth study into looking at the kinds of communication strategies used by the Chinese students in conveying their message.

Another characteristic which triggered the researcher to adopt this method is that in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis (Merriam 1998). Further, Merriam (1998) says that having an understanding in the goal of the research, the human instrument, which are all able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem like an ideal means of collecting and analyzing data, hence, it was employed.

In qualitative research, the most important question is whether the results are consistent with the data collected (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and one way to accomplish that is to do it through an audit trail. An audit trail in a qualitative study describes how data was collected, and how decisions were arrived at throughout the inquiry. Thus, to ensure both validity and reliability, the researcher employed a series of approach encompassing a triangulation of member checks, peer review and audit trail.

In establishing the research methodology, it is necessary to identify the specific modes of qualitative research methods that would best suit the purpose of this study. With reference to the qualitative method, the researcher made the decision to adopt the use of video recording, audio recording, observations of the communicative tasks set for the participants and interview when the need arose for clarification of findings from the recordings and observations. This was to ensure that what is transcribed as data is as precise as possible.

3.2 Selections of the subjects

The sampling procedure can be considered as the most important element in a survey. According to Merriam (1998), collecting samples for a study involves looking into aspects such as where, when, who and what need to be observed. In brief, this means that a sampling procedure would generally involve identification of survey participants, location, time period and context. This is applied in this research.

Nonetheless, before looking into the various methods of identifying sampling groups, it is necessary to have an understanding of some basic sampling concepts. First, it is necessary to explain that a ‘population’ may refer to a particular sampling subject and in scientific terms, it refers to the total collection of units or elements a researcher wants to analyze (Nardi, 2003). Since a human population is generally large and working within the constraints of time and money, Nardi (2003) says that a researcher may also end up generating some statistics from a ‘sample’ of people who may have been chosen to represent the entire population. This refers to representative sampling.

There are various methods of collecting sampling. Among these are simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling, cluster sampling, stage sampling, convenience sampling, quota sampling, purposive sampling, dimensional sampling and snowball sampling (Cohen & Manion 1980). However, for the purpose of this research, a purposive sampling was used. A purposive sampling refers to a selected group of participants who had been chosen based on the need of the nature of the study and in the context of this study, only Chinese students from China studying in Malaysian higher institutions of education were needed.

The sample participants identified for this are 10 Chinese students who came from different provinces of China. While some have lived here for a few years, others had only lived for less than six months but this was not taken as a consideration in this study because it was deemed not important since, preliminary interview conducted by the researcher shows that there was not much difference in their level of English proficiency. All of them are currently studying in Malaysia. They have all come to Malaysia to pursue their studies, after completing their high school exams in China. In normal circumstances, the duration of the high school education system in China is for three years and English is one of the subjects which are taught besides Chinese literature, maths and other subjects. Thus, it is categorised as a subject that all students need to take. For the basis of this study, the students selected were interviewed before being given the designed tasks. They were then placed in pairs for the purpose of this study. The table below gives the background of the students.

Table 3.2: Background of participants

No	Gender	Participants	Age	location	Staying time in Malaysia
1	F	Zhang (Z)	18	Hangzhou	3 months
2	M	He (H)	19	Shenyang	3 months
3	M	Miao(M)	23	Shijiazhuang	6 months
4	M	Cheng (C)	21	Shijiazhuang	6 months
5	F	Cui (C)	22	Jilin	2 years
6	F	Du (D)	24	Shenyang	4 years
7	M	Wei (W)	23	Shenyang	4 years
8	M	Sua (S)	21	Hebei	4 years
9	F	Wen (W)	24	Xian	4 months
10	F	Pang(P)	22	Hefei	4 months

The students who were selected as pairs were chosen based on some common characteristics which are explained in detail below:

1. They are all graduates from high school in China and had been exposed to similar subjects during their period of study.

2. English was a compulsory subject in their high school and the study takes on the assumption that they had all learnt English under the two methods mentioned in chapter 1.

3. Their level of English proficiency is at almost the same level and they all seem capable of holding conversations on general topics.

4. It is assumed also that apart from regular lessons in English in China, they might also have some informal exposure to English through the public media in the form of radio, television, the internet as well as English magazines. Their exposure in

Malaysia may have some or no impact since they claim that they do not read much in English which living in Malaysia.

5. They are all from homes where little or no English is spoken or heard very much.

The purpose for selecting students with these common characteristics is to ensure reliability in the data collected and also to vouch for validity of the findings.

3.3 Instruments for collecting data

The most naturalistic method of data collection is believed to be oral interviews and conversations. Such methods have been conducted by Poulisse (1990) and Wannaruk (2002) who carried out "oral interviews of participants who were non-native students of English and their native speaking teachers". They both identified that this kind of elicitation technique tend to be more realistic. However, their studies suggest that communication strategies were hardly found in the participants because what the participants might say is more or less controlled by the experimenters (Kasper and Kellerman 1997). Nonetheless, Wannaruk (2002) found that oral interviews can be arranged between students and native English teachers but Green (1995) and Khanji (1996) used conversation tasks where they asked their subjects to play roles. In such tasks, the technique may not be so easy to control as it involves speech and huge amounts of data. In addition, in role playing, a researcher may also put her participants into less authentic roles such as those she wants the participants to perform. Whatever the obstacles faced, it is true to say that no one research approach or method can be perfect and this is why, the researcher applied a three pronged approach to gather data in this study.

Three tasks were designed to elicit data. One of the tasks given to the 5 pairs required them to talk about a common topic. The participants were only required to carry out a normal conversation in a relaxing atmosphere so that they do not feel overwhelmed with tension. To do this, the researcher talked to them prior to recording and they were also reminded to be themselves. Two instruments were used to collect data: a video camcorder and an audio recorder that was placed close to them as they talked. There was no false start as the researcher encouraged them to continue talking while the camcorder was shooting.

3.4 Selections of the tasks and the input

In order to generate talk that could be as natural as possible while under experimental conditions, the tasks designed for this study had to be ones that would be relatively less controlled and more common to the students.

3.4.1 Designing the tasks

In designing the tasks, several factors were taken into consideration to ensure that the tasks could be carried out effectively:

1. The success of the tasks would not depend on special knowledge. Instead, it depended on communicating one's own ideas or views on topics common to them.

2. This is a pair work, not a role-play. Subjects were asked to be simply themselves although topics were controlled. There was little interference from the researcher who did not assign nor indicate who should begin or who should be the second speaker, and so forth.

3. The participants were also informed that whatever they say, there would be no right or wrong answers. The participants were free to talk based on choices derived from their personal experience or even individual preference. This is to ensure real-life situations are being discussed as freely as possible.

4. Spontaneous speech was ensured through a somewhat flexible time frame assigned which is about 20 minutes for each task.

5. The tasks were not set one after the other but on separate days to ensure that the participants are not overtaxed.

The table below illustrates the contents drawn up for each task.

Task 1:   **Self-introduction**: In this task, the participants were prompted by a hypothetical situation where they were asked to pick someone up at the airport. Subsequently, the participants were asked to describe themselves in the target language which is English in order for the visitor to recognize them. They were asked to state their name, where they come from, what they are doing in Malaysia, etc. There is a requirement for authentic language exchange. The task was considered to be on a common topic, thus ensuring that the conversation is natural and realistic. This task was the first administered, thus, enabling the students to be at ease when they begin to converse initially.

Task 2:

Narration – a movie/story: This task required the participants to narrate a story based on a movie, or any other topic, such as TV programme which is of interest. The participants were also allowed to take their own or friends' stories which might have occurred in the past to narrate to their partner. The conversation between the pairs should be on a movie/story and they were then required to express their feelings/opinions about the movie/story and what they had or could learn from the movie/story. The purpose of this task is to identify how successful they are in conveying their opinions and views on the topic selected in a continuous manner.

Task 3:

Description: This task requires the participants to make use of their previously learnt vocabulary in describing a favourite city which they admire or remember from past experience. The participants were asked to give a brief description of their selected favourite cities and to give the reason why they had chosen this city. They can describe the features and location of this city, even the culture and special things related such as food, education and population. The purpose of this task is to find out the level of their descriptive vocabulary and to identify how they solve problems encountered with regards to their limited vocabulary.

The three speaking tasks were expected to elicit a range of communication strategies. Across all tasks, it was assumed that if the students did not have the linguistic ability to easily complete a particular task, they might be expected to employ a range of communication strategies to cope with their deficiency.

3.4.2 Administration of tasks

Special instructions by the researcher preceded the performance of each pair. The instructions are listed below:

1. The subjects were told that the interactions were to be carried out in English and if the speakers found it difficult to express themselves in English as far as possible.

2. The subjects were informed not to be intimidated by the video recording process since it was not for public viewing and it was only confined to the research.

3. They were also urged to put forward their views boldly and not to simply accept suggestions given by the other member in the pair work.

4. No writing was allowed during the interactions

3.5 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected in two main ways. They are as follows:

1) Video/Tape -recording

Video recording is the main tool in this research. A video camcorder was set up where it can catch all the actions and the wordings of the conversation. Meanwhile a tape recorder was also placed nearby to where the pair is seated and this was done as a backup for instances when the sound of the video recording may not be clear or audible. Video and tape recording was carried out for the 3 tasks set for the 5 pairs of participants. They were not all done in one go so as to give the participants time to unwind. The duration of each video recording was about 20 minutes hence; the total recording for all the 5 pairs involved in the 3 tasks accumulated a total of about 300 minutes.

2) Observation and interviewing

While doing the video and tape recordings the expressions of the participants and related details were also observed. Notes were also taken to provide further support. The data collected through observation was used to strengthen the analysis of data from the video and audio recordings. Further, where necessary, the students were interviewed. This was done to obtain clarification where doubts occurred in the process of transcribing the data collected.

3.6 Processing the data

The data was then transcribed and the transcriptions included the paralinguistic features, such as laughter, smiles, pauses, fillers and hesitations. This was done by replaying the video recordings several times to ensure accuracy and completeness. This was further strengthened through analysis of the notes taken during observation.

In order to facilitate the analysis, a system was devised to identify each pair, its members and each utterance. To keep track of each subject's turns and utterances, each speaker was given a code which is the first alphabet of each person's surname, e.g. H or D. Each utterance made by the speaker is considered a turn. Each turn could consist of a word, a phrase, a sentence or more than a sentence. This was useful to keep track of each speaker's contribution to the interaction in terms of language used, strategies applied as well as the extent of the involvement.

In transcribing the data, each utterance was then transcribed as closely as possible to the actual speech produced by the participants. This means that errors, repetitions, gap fillers, grammar mistakes have all been as faithfully and accurately reproduced as the video tapes allowed. Where Mandarin is used, this would also be indicated in the data.

The first step in processing the data consists of identification and description of certain recurring patterns in the data. The aim is to identify sequential structures which are organized by procedures oriented to by the participants. This is a predominantly inductive process of investigation in that the researcher does not start out with a specific hypothesis about discourse structure but rather inspects the data to see what structures emerge. Thus, the researcher identifies and records the structures which emerge as characteristic of the data rather than those that are theoretically pre- defined.

3.7: Analysis of Data

The researcher begins to analyse the data by examining the corpus so as to identify specific transactions containing the communication strategies reviewed in Chapter two. This study focused mainly on examining and identifying the communication strategies used by the 5 pairs of Chinese students by using Dornyei's (1995) classification because not only was data collected from a cooperative setting, the researcher was capable of identifying communication strategies directly and easily from the performance data in transcriptions. The transcription system used in this study was adapted from those developed by Du Bois, Paplino & Cumming (1991, 1993), and the utterances of the respective speakers were presented in three columns: the column on the left which indicates the turns of the speaker; the middle column shows the speaker, and the column on the right was the transcriptions of the utterances. Some parts will be highlighted for the purposes of discussion. An example of the analysis of data is shown below:

Turn	Speaker	Utterance
186	H	And…I have a movie, eh… I forgot the name, is "unfair trade" you know , in Chinese name is "不道德交易"
187	Z	I never heard that, is that famous?
188	H	***Not very famous, but…er…if you, you will feel***
189	Z	How was that movie
190	H	Er…the story is talking about…a girl…a couple… and they don't have money, poor and can't pay for the house

For this study, analysis will be of three categories: problems faced by the Chinese students in using English for communication, the various types of communications strategies used by these Chinese students to overcome the problems faced, and the frequency of the communication strategies used. Noticeable deviation from the students in the interlanguage syntax, and word choice or discourse pattern were considered as the right elements for identifying the communication strategies. In addition, performance features, such as false starts, pauses, drawls (lengthening the sounds as a time-gaining device), fillers (*ah*, *em*), repeats, slips of the tongue (lapses and speech errors) and self-repairs can be evidences of problems in the learner's language proficiency (Færch and Kasper 1993b) and be taken with the features used to signal a communication strategy for appropriate usage.

The learners' production could be compared with the optimal meaning – actual meaning (Varadi 1980). When differences were detected, the utterance was then classified as communication strategies such as: avoidance strategies or compensatory strategies as identified by Dörnyei (1995). Therefore, to find answers to the research questions, the researcher employed designed research methods and gathered transcriptions which were analysed and the findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

In chapter 4, the analysis will focus on the types of communication strategies used, the frequency of these strategies used and finally a discussion on the kinds of problems faced by the participants will be given.

3.8 Problems Encountered

Much time was wasted during the video recording sessions which took almost seven weeks. This was mainly because of the participants whose schedules had to be changed as a result of circumstances where one of the pair was not available. Transcriptions had to be done by transferring the recordings in to DVDs which then had to be played and replayed numerous times while the recording too had to be checked over and over again to ensure that nothing was missed out from the video recording. Occasionally, there were problems like inaudibility as what was being said by the participants was difficult to hear due to the subjects' poor pronunciation and the researcher's lack of technical knowledge. Fortunately, the subjects were kind enough to offer assistance to the researcher to transcribe accurately whenever their help was needed through interviews that were carried out. In addition to this, the researcher had to also constantly refer to the notes taken during observation for further verification.

3.9 Summary

This chapter gave detailed information on all the issues related to the research methodology. It began with a preview on the research design adopted. As stated, a qualitative research method comprising of video and audio recording, observations and to a small extent interviews were used. Next, the sampling process was defined and details of the participants background were given. Next the chapter went on to give details as to the instruments used for data collection. The chapter also dealt in detail on how the tasks for the study was designed and administered. Information as to the how data was collected and processed and analysed was also given. Lastly, the chapter also discussed some of the problems encountered in the research.