

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will provide an account of the research design, focusing on the procedures and tools employed in order to answer the research questions. As this study is mainly qualitative, descriptive, exploratory and evaluative in nature, and to a small extent quantitative, there will not be any reference to quantitative measures or statistical tools as the results will basically be presented in tables and extracts while the quantitative data will be presented in percentages and frequency counts. It should be noted at the outset that the methodology was to a certain extent an evolving one that took definite shape as the study progressed.

3.1 Rationale for a Mixed Research Perspective

While most of the summary-writing studies carried out in the past are mainly in the L1 context and are usually quantitative in nature, this study embodied mainly a qualitative perspective and partly a quantitative approach. The reason is that this study attempts to generally explore what goes on in the minds of students during the three stages identified by van Dijk and Kintsch (1983). In doing so, this present study aims to identify the problems students encounter and the productive and non-productive strategies they employ to overcome those problems in summary-writing task.

This part of the study which is exploring the students' minds is unique, situational, non-tangible, as it ought to be studied in naturally occurring situation. Hence, the utilization of qualitative methods is justified by the nature of the research questions mentioned earlier in this chapter, which required that the researcher approach human or human-

related resources to answer these questions. Newman and Benz (1998) emphasize that research questions should determine what research methods are used. It is believed that the richness and complexity of students' attitudes and beliefs towards learning might be better understood through qualitative research techniques than quantitative research techniques. It is further stated that quantitative research often renders static scales, whereas qualitative research can yield dynamic personal attitudes.

This study aims to explore the students' use of productive and non-productive strategies in summarizing by inferring from their interviews on what goes on in their minds during the three stages apart from looking for such evidence in their written summaries. Thus, the use of qualitative method in this study is appropriate since it takes place in a natural setting and depends on data collection methods that are based on words rather than on numbers. These methods are interviews and documents (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) in the form of students' written summary scripts.

Patton (1990) considers thick description in qualitative research as an advantage because the emphasis is on people, events, and texts. Likewise, Gay (1996) states that qualitative methods go beyond just mere descriptions of events and provide in-depth understanding of the situation being studied. In his words:

Qualitative researchers are not just concerned with describing the way things are, but also with gaining insights into how things got to be the way they are, how people feel about the way things are, what they believe, what meanings they attach to various activities, and so forth. (1996: 13)

This study aims at describing as much as possible of what was happening when students engaged in the activities being studied mainly the summarizing activity, so that any implications or recommendations are amply rooted in the findings of the study.

The present study conforms to Silverman's (1993) call for the need to utilize a "natural" setting. The researcher depended heavily on natural resources to collect data that help give valid descriptions of the activities being studied and reliable answers to the research questions. This study was conducted in connection with a real classroom during a regular academic term, and with MUET students taking the writing component as a requirement, which did not in any way obligate them to participate in this study. Unlike the artificial and constrained settings utilized in quantitative research that influence behavior (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), the present study focused on student attitudes toward authentic activities in an authentic classroom involving the writing experiences of ESL students.

3.2 Overview of Methodology

One of the major problems faced by speakers of English as second language (ESL), especially when they pursue their studies at tertiary institutions, is their inability to summarize and extract the gist from their reading materials thus leaving them at a disadvantage compared to adept students. This study examines the summarizing strategies used by pre-university ESL students at a local urban secondary school. Strategies, as Nunan (1999) has described are mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language, and are non-observable and are not easy to study. Using multiple data collection methods, this qualitative study has attempted to find answers for its three research questions i.e., (i) What are the problems encountered during the summarization process by high and low proficiency pre-university students? (ii) What are the productive and unproductive strategies used by pre-university students in summary-writing, namely during the comprehension, condensation and production

stages? and (iii) Are there differences in the selected productive and unproductive strategies used by high and low proficiency pre-university students?

The SILL questionnaire which consists of 50 Likert scale items was administered at the beginning of this study to get an overview of students' general strategy use. It did not give sufficient information on what exactly were the strategies used during summarization. Following that, the main data collection tool in this study, the Modified Think-Aloud-Protocol (MTAP) - an interview schedule, was used to collect data for answering both research questions one and two. Besides that, students' written summary scripts were also analysed to answer research question three. After data collection, the data was analyzed using data analysis tools such as the Criteria Checklist.

3.3 The Research Tools

3.3.1 Modified Think-Aloud-Protocol (MTAP)

The Think Aloud Protocol (TAP) is a data gathering method used to gather data in psychology and a range of social sciences. The think-aloud method was first developed by Clayton Lewis and further refined by Ericsson & Simon (1980, 1987, 1993).

Think aloud protocols involve participants thinking aloud as they are performing a set of specified tasks. Participants are asked to say whatever they are looking at, thinking, doing, and feeling, as they go about their task. This enables observers to see first-hand the process of task completion (rather than only its final product). Observers at such a task session are asked to objectively take note of everything that participants say, without attempting to interpret their actions and words. Task sessions are often audiotaped and videotaped so that researchers can go back and refer to what participants

did, and how they reacted. The purpose of this method is to make explicit what is implicitly present in subjects who are able to perform a specific task.

In this study, a modified version of the think-aloud-protocol (TAP) was used as the main data collection instrument. The Modified Think-Aloud-Protocol (MTAP) consists of a semi-structured questionnaire within which was embedded the TAP. (see Appendix A1 for MTAP Interview Schedule). The embedded TAP too was modified so that it focused on problems encountered and strategies used to solve the problems during the process of summary writing. Prior to the MTAP interview session, students were given the summary-writing task.(see Section 3.2.1) During the MTAP interview session, the concerned subjects referred to their written summaries as they spoke about problems encountered during the three stages of summarization and what they did to overcome those problems. The participants were also asked to state their feelings at the three stages of summarization.

The rationale for using a MTAP in this research design is to collect two sets of data using one method. One set of data is to identify the problems students face during summarization process from the students' point of view and the second set of data is to understand what went on in the minds of students as they were trying to solve problems encountered during summarization. The second set of data was used by the researcher to infer strategies used by students based on a criteria checklist devised by researcher using the MUET summary marking scheme (as an examiner, the researcher had access to the information in this confidential document) as well as on the basic characteristics of a summary, i.e. it should be comprehensive, concise, coherent and written in one's own words without changing the original meaning,

The interviews were audio-taped using a tape-recorder and 4 sixty-minute audio cassettes, and were later transcribed into 96 pages of transcription. Prior permission to tape record the interviews was obtained from the subjects. Five students from the higher proficiency group (MUET band of 4-5) and six students from the lower proficiency group (MUET band of 3-2) were short-listed for the individual interviews from the original 25 who participated in the summary writing task. This selection was done based on their June MUET results. Although a total of 11 students participated in this section of the study, only data collected from 10 subjects were analyzed and used for this study as the recording of one of the subjects was not clear due to technical problem during the recording session. The recorded interviews were later transcribed and productive and unproductive strategies were inferred by the researcher from the transcriptions using a data analysis instrument.

The researcher concurs with Dexter's definition (1970) of the individual interviews as "a conversation with a purpose" (as cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985:268) and carried out the interviews with that in mind. The purpose of the interview was to gather information from human sources. Maxwell (1996) asserts the value of interviews as they allow the interviewer and the interviewees to work back and forth, reconstruct the past, analyze the present, and predict the future.

Since this study was conducted to investigate what goes on in the students' minds during the three stages of the summary-writing process, interviewing can be one of the best ways to know about the participant's feelings and thoughts, as Patton (1990:195) puts it:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe . . . we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behavior that took place at some previous point in time . . . we have to ask people questions about these

things. The purpose of interviewing then is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective.

3.3.2 Scripts of Written Summaries

The initial 25 participants of this study were given a summary-writing task during class time and this task was analyzed by the researcher. The text chosen for this task was the MUET examination question set by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate for the 2004 December paper (see Appendix B2). The research task was administered after having confirmed that none of the subjects had sat for that examination. The reason for selecting a national exam question was to ensure that the validity and reliability of the instrument was given due importance. The subjects were given a 700 word-length essay titled 'How the Mass Media Influence Their Audiences' and asked to summarize it in about 100 words within 45 minutes.

3.3.3 The SILL Questionnaire

The SILL Questionnaire (Strategies Inventory of Language Learning) by Oxford (1990: 293-300) consists of 50 statements with Likert-scale responses which are grouped into six categories of strategies namely: memory strategies (1-9), cognitive strategies (10-23), compensation strategies (24-29), metacognitive strategies (30-38), affective strategies (39-44) and social strategies (45-50) (see Appendix A1). The purpose of using this questionnaire was to gather general background information on language strategies used by the individual subjects before carrying out the summary-writing task followed by the interviews which are meant to explore in-depth the students' strategy use, in particular in summary-writing.

3.3.4 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted by researcher prior to the MTAP session with a different group of five students to ascertain that the interview questions were appropriate and capable of eliciting what they were supposed to and allow a free flow of sharing by the interviewee. Amendments were made to the interview schedule when one of the participants in the pilot study raised the question of ambiguity in the framing of the interview questions. According to Nunan (1995), piloting gives the researcher the opportunity to find out if the questions are yielding the kind of data required and to eliminate any question which may be ambiguous or confusing to the interviewee. The pilot study was also instrumental in the researcher changing the interview from structured to semi structured interview. Nunan (1995) also asserts that unlike an unstructured interview and a structured interview, the semi-structured interview is more flexible whereby in a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it but does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Identification of Idea Units in Students' Summary Scripts

The students' summaries were read and analyzed by the researcher for idea units or content points. A total of 11 idea units were identified by the examination syndicate and the same content points were used in this study to analyse the summaries for paraphrased idea units and copied idea units. Later the idea units were identified and matched to see if they were paraphrased or copied correctly, partly correctly, incorrectly or show absence of idea units. This analysis was done based on the principle

meanings of paraphrasing or copying adapted from The Johns' Summarization Protocol (see Appendix B4) used in summarisation process and the scoring procedure at three levels of idea units which are correct, partly correct and incorrect adapted from Chimbganda's (2003) study on summary protocols. The Johns' Summarization Protocol is a scale for summary protocols developed by Johns (1984) to analyse the summary protocols of underprepared and adept university students' summaries. Basically this scale is divided into two main parts: correct replications and distortions. The replications part consists of three types: reproduction at idea unit level, combinations of two idea units and macro-propositions which are writer invented statements that provide the gist. On the other hand, distortions are divided into four types.

3.4.2 Criteria Checklist to Infer Strategies Used By Participants

The Researcher has attempted to draw up a list of criteria which could determine whether a particular strategy used by the subjects is a productive or an unproductive strategy. She has used her own background knowledge and experience as a trained language teacher and MUET examiner to devise a checklist of criteria based upon which summary writing strategies can be inferred and categorized as either productive or unproductive. The characteristics of an effective summary were also used as a guideline in creating this criteria checklist (for instance conciseness, coherence, use of own words, not distorting original meaning and the inclusion of main ideas). Although the researcher was unable to get MUET examiners to vet the criteria checklist, the researcher's colleagues who have been teaching English for more than 10 years helped to vet the checklist. This was done to ensure there is inter-rater validity and reliability. A description of how the criteria checklist was drawn up, its purpose and how it was used in evaluating the strategies will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4, section

4.3. Please refer to Table 4.4 for the Criteria Checklist, the data analysis instrument specifically devised for this study.

The productive and unproductive strategies which were inferred by researcher from the MTAP sessions were later categorized as strategies used during comprehension, condensation and production stages respectively. The inferred list of strategies revealed the good strategies (productive strategies) and the wrong strategies (unproductive strategies) being used by ESL students in their summary-writing. The correct replications and distortions of idea units have been identified by other researchers in the same field (Johns, 1984). However, to the researcher's knowledge, the productive and unproductive strategies in summarization have not been identified in previous studies and the researcher finds it equally important for pedagogical rectification.

3.5 The Research Participants

3.5.1 Why Sixth-Formers Were Chosen As Subjects

Having reached the pinnacle of secondary education, sixth formers (pre-university students) should have acquired a good range of vocabulary including synonyms and antonyms, together with a good grounding in basic grammar all of which are sufficient to enable them to identify types of words, phrases, clauses and different parts of a sentence fairly well even though ambiguous about shades of meanings. They should also have the ability to identify thesis statement and topic statements besides main ideas and supporting ideas in a text fairly correctly. Only then, can they be considered fit to function well in the said language beyond the secondary school. It cannot be denied that summary writing is still one of the best ways to evaluate several reading and writing skills at any one time. Hence, summary-writing is a consolidative test to be given at the

end of the secondary education to ascertain that the student has acquired sufficient training in the particular language to function independently at post-secondary or tertiary level.

Merriam (1988:76) emphasizes this issue of selecting participants who “can express thoughts’ feelings, opinions . . . on the topic being studied”. Hence, who else can provide better insight in this matter than sixth formers who have gone through six years of secondary level schooling and are supposed to have accumulated all the necessary strategies and skills, be it cognitive, metacognitive or social.

The researcher decided not to investigate the teachers’ views about this topic, because the emphasis of the study is on the students’ perspective, the problems they face and the strategies they employ based on their comprehension of the text and their lingua background. However, the findings of this study, apart from knowing the learner strategies would definitely help the ESL teacher to understand the students’ problems and abilities so that they can plan and tailor their lessons more effectively in order to achieve the objectives of summary-writing easily.

3.5.2 Purposive Sampling

The participants in this study were a class of 25 upper six students in the age range of 18 to 19, from a prominent girls’ school in Klang Valley who had taken the MUET test in June and were retaking the paper in November to improve their bands while this study was conducted in September. Majority of them fared with bands 2 and 3 while a handful scored bands 4 and 5. This ethnically mixed group of students, mainly Chinese, Indian and Malay, came from a mixed background of primary education too. Apart from

national primary schools, there were several students in this class who were from Chinese and Tamil primary schools. Therefore English was not only a second language but also a third language to many of them.

There were two upper six classes of almost equal level of English in this school. Since researcher was assigned to teach the first class which had 30 students, it was more convenient to choose this class as subjects for the study. The purpose of this study was explained to the students by the researcher on the first day of their meeting. All the students in this class were asked by the researcher to voluntarily participate in this study. However, only 25 filled in the SILL questionnaire voluntarily. Therefore, the same 25 students were retained for the summary writing section of the study while only 10 out of the 25 were selected to be administered the Modified Think Aloud Protocol (MTAP). Although the participants represent different cultural backgrounds and one gender (female), the purpose of this study is not to generalize the findings. It mainly focuses on describing their experiences throughout the summary-writing process, mainly the comprehension stage (reading), condensation stage (selection of main propositions) and the production stage (summary-writing), which is based on the reading-writing connection and which uses language learning strategies. The study focuses on providing an appropriately thick description of the problems encountered and the strategies employed by participants during these three crucial stages of the summarization process.

3.5.2.1 Sample for MTAP Sessions

A total of 10 were selected from the main sample of 25 subjects as mentioned above for the Modified Think Aloud Protocol sessions. Five of these subjects belong to the high proficiency group while the other five belong to the low group. The categorization into

high and low was based on their MUET band which they have already sat for in June two months before this study was conducted. Amongst the high group, 4 obtained band five while one obtained band 4. There was no one who obtained band 6, the highest band in MUET for this batch. On the other hand, amongst the low group, two subjects obtained band 3 while the other three obtained band 2. These subjects also attended primary schools of different medium. For the high group, four of them were from Malay medium and one from Tamil medium while for the low group, three from Chinese medium, one from Tamil and one from Malay medium. All of them first started learning summary writing in Form Four.

According to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), the researcher's main goal is to obtain purposive and directed sampling that renders a large amount of information. They also mention two essential criteria for purposive sampling: selection of who and what to study, and choosing who and what not to study. In this study, the researcher has decided to select the sixth formers who wrote summaries for their MUET writing component, since they can best help to answer the research questions in this study as rationalized in Section 3.5.1.

3.6 Setting of the Study

This study was conducted at an all girls urban secondary school situated in the Klang Valley. Specifically, the study took place in the Upper Six A class during MUET writing lessons conducted by the researcher. Firstly, the SILL questionnaire was administered in this class to gather general background information about the students language strategy use. After this preliminary round, the written task was carried out in the classroom under exam conditions while the MTAP interview sessions were

conducted immediately after the written test in the school library where students spend their free time to do homework and unwind. The library was chosen as a conducive place to conduct the interviews so that participants are comfortable and familiar with the setting. Permission to use the library was sought from the school library teacher before interview sessions. Prior permission was also obtained by the researcher from the school principal for the 10 selected subjects to participate in the MTAP sessions immediately after the writing task. This was done to alleviate unnecessary pressure imposed on the participants during interview which may have an impact on their responses.

The class met four times per week throughout the second term of the year. This study was conducted during the second term of the year. The MUET class consists of the Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing Components. In this class the emphasis was on the reading and writing components because the Listening and Speaking components were emphasized in the first term of the year.

First and foremost written permission was sought and obtained from the district education department to carry out the study. This was followed by the full permission from the principal of the school where the study was to be conducted. The participants were also informed about the study and its aims; and with their consent it was carried out in their classroom during the summary-writing lessons.

3.7 Triangulation

The rich qualitative data that has been collected by the multiple methods in this study is aimed to achieve triangulation of methods so as to strengthen the validity and reliability

of this interesting and useful research apart from obtaining an optimum amount of information local to the context of the study.

3.8 Conclusion

As this is a qualitative study exploratory and introspective in nature, the researcher is confident that the various tools employed have been able to yield rich and natural data. The triangulation of methods aimed here in this research design would ensure the data to be reliable and valid.