

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study is a classroom-based exploration, which focuses on students' interaction in relation to the reading of literary text. In this study, the researcher set out to explore three research questions. They are, what social language learning strategies do students use in group work, what are the students' perceptions of the use of these strategies and what are the outcomes of using these strategies in group work. The time frame for this study was two months. This chapter will discuss details pertaining to the research site, participants, the literary text used, data collection methods and data analysis.

3.1 Research Site

This study was carried out in an all girls secondary school (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Puteri Anggerik) which is situated in urban Kuala Lumpur. The entire school structure consists of blocks of buildings, painted with beautiful murals surrounded by palm trees and fenced all around the school. Some attempt has been made at landscaping but this is limited to the office, staff room and the front entrance of the school. 1300 students are studying in this school. There are two sessions: Remove until Form Two (afternoon session) and Form Three until Form Five (morning session). The majority of the students are from the lower income group with a minority from middle class families. The students are of average proficiency in English. The students usually use their mother tongue (Malay, Chinese or Tamil) to

interact among themselves outside the English Language class. During English lessons they do speak in English but they usually tend to diverge into using their mother tongue.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study are in Form Four Ros. There are thirty nine students in this class. Form Four Ros is a mixed ability class. Some of the students are fairly proficient in English, some are of average proficiency and the others are of low proficiency in English. Half of the students are Malays and the other half are Chinese.

Ten students were selected as the focal informants for this study. As this study compares the social language learning strategies used between fairly proficient and low proficiency students, the students were selected based on their proficiency level. Five students (Julia, Janet, Junaidah, Jamie and Jane) who are fairly proficient in English and another five (Liza, Laila, Linda, Sarah and Sally) who are of low proficiency were selected.

The selection was also based on their performance in their examinations (see Appendix 3) that reflects their proficiency level to a certain degree. In addition, their willingness to be participants was also taken into consideration. Moreover, both groups of learners are also extroverts, lively and active in class. Therefore, they may be more vocal than the other students in voicing out or articulating their opinions.

The focus of this study is between fairly proficient and low proficiency students. So, the students were grouped together in two homogeneous groups. According to Chitravelu, Sithamparan and Teh (1995), a homogeneous group comprises students of about the same ability level.

3.3 Texts

As this study was done in a literature-based Form Four ESL class, two literary texts (short stories) were examined over a period of two months. Double periods (80 minutes) were used on an alternative week basis to teach both the literary texts.

The Lotus Eater by William Somerset Maugham was selected for this study. The synopsis of this story is as follows: The narrator visited a friend in Capri. He met an interesting person called Wilson. Sixteen years ago, Wilson left his job and life in London for Capri because he fell in love with the beautiful island on a holiday there. Wilson only had enough money for 25 years that is until he reached sixty. After that, he planned to die. When the narrator visited Capri many years later, he learnt that Wilson tried to commit suicide. However, he did not die. Having no money, he had to live in a woodshed. He looked after goats and chickens. He became a recluse, running away whenever he saw anyone. When he died, it was on a hillside overlooking the scenery of the bay of Naples that he loved so much.

The Necklace by Guy de Maupassant was also selected for this study. The synopsis of the story is as follows: The Loisels received an invitation to an important reception. However, Madame Loisel felt she could not go even though she

loved to because she did not have a suitable dress and jewellery. As a result, she borrowed a diamond necklace from her friend, Madame Frostier. Madame Loisel had a great time at the ball. Unfortunately, she lost the necklace. The Loisels had to borrow a lot of money to buy another necklace to replace the lost one. They spent the next ten years doing exhausting work to pay off the debt. One day, Madame Loisel learnt by chance that the necklace she borrowed was an imitation, not real diamonds.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods used in this study were participant observation, audio taped recordings of group work sessions, an examination of the teaching learning materials and students' work, student questionnaires and interviews. The rationale for these data collection methods, the informants involved as well as the procedures used will be discussed. This chapter will also discuss how data was analysed.

3.4.1 Participant Observation

Observation was chosen because it enables the researcher to have a better picture of what actually happens in the literature-based ESL class. According to Seliger and Shohamy (1989), "The main use of observation is for examining a phenomenon or a behaviour while it is going on." (p.162). In addition, observations were chosen because it enables the researcher to observe ordinary events and everyday activities that happens in the natural setting (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). It

also enables the researcher to be directly involved with the participants and personally experience life in the field setting. In this study, the researcher took the role of a participant as observer.

The observations were aimed at finding out what social language learning strategies learners used in group work as well as the outcomes of these strategies. Observations focused on three main aspects of the social language learning strategies: asking questions, cooperating with others and empathising with others (see Figure 2.1, Chapter 2).

Ten focal informants were selected to be observed. The focal informants were in two different groups (fairly proficient and low proficiency group). The informants were observed four times while they were working in groups. The observations schedule was as follows.

- First lesson on the short story, “The Lotus Eater” (see Appendix 4 – lesson plan to see at what stage the group work was conducted and the activity).
- Second lesson on the short story, “The Lotus Eater” (see Appendix 5 - lesson plan to see at what stage the group work was conducted and the activity).
- Third lesson on the short story, “The Necklace” (see Appendix 6 – lesson plan to see at what stage the group work was conducted and the activity).
- Fourth lesson on the short story, “The Necklace” (see Appendix 7 – lesson plan to see at what stage the group work was conducted and the activity).

During observation field notes were taken. Field notes are, “. . . a written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collection and reflecting on the data in a qualitative data” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 107). In addition, field notes

. . . can provide any study with a personal log that helps the researcher to keep track of the development of the project, to visualise how the research plan has been affected by the data

collected, and to remain self-conscious of how he or she has been influenced by the data. (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 107).

In the field notes two aspects were taken into consideration that is the descriptive and the reflective aspects. In the process of observation, field notes were made on the nature of the task set for each group, actual conversation, dialogue and phrases that occurred during group work. It also included the physical setting of the classroom and accounts of particular events.

This is in line with Bogdan and Biklen (1982) notion, that in descriptive field notes the main concern is to capture a word-picture of the setting, people, actions and conversations as observed. Moreover, speculations, feelings, ideas and impressions of the researcher (observer) were also “captured”. As pointed out by Bogdan and Biklen (1982), reflective field notes capture the observer’s frame of mind, ideas and concerns.

3.4.2 Audio Taped Recordings

The four group sessions that were observed were also audio taped. The stimulated recall technique was also employed in the process of observation, where the researcher audio taped and transcribed the entire interaction that took place during the group work sessions. According to Nunan (1992), “Stimulated recall is a technique which the researcher records and transcribes parts of a lesson and then gets the teacher to comment on what is happening at the time that the teaching and learning took place” (p. 94). Such a technique can yield insights into the processes of teaching and learning which perhaps would be difficult to obtain by other means.

In this study, the comments were made by the students as to what was happening during their group work sessions. The researcher then, made comments as to what happened in the entire process (group work). Comments were made on the three main aspects of social language learning strategies (see Figure 2 – Chapter 2). Ten focal informants working in two different groups were recorded four times during four different lessons (see Appendix 4 – 7, stages group work took place). Each recording took about 20 – 30 minutes.

3.4.3 Teaching Learning Materials and Students' Work

The teaching learning materials were designed to enhance the process of teaching and learning short stories in a literature-based ESL class. Seven activities were devised to facilitate the process of teaching and learning of short stories during group work. Firstly, an activity, which required the students to predict what, the story is going to be about based on the title (see Appendix 4). This activity was also carried out during the first lesson of *The Lotus Eater*. Secondly, an activity which required the students to discuss about the plot of *The Lotus Eater* (see Appendix 4). This activity was carried out during the first lesson. Thirdly, an activity which required the students to discuss about the main characters in *The Lotus Eater* and to find textual evidence to support their statements (see Appendix 5). This activity was carried out in the second lesson.

Next, an activity, which required the students to discuss about the plot of the story *The Necklace*, based on a sequence of questions (see Appendix 6) which was carried out in the third lesson. Lastly, a series of activities, which required the

students to discuss about the main themes in the short story, *The Necklace* (see Appendix 7). The students were required to work in groups for all the activities. The students' work enables the researcher to identify the outcomes of the use of social language learning strategies in group work and if they have understood the requirements for each activity, to check if students understood the text and the quality of the discussion.

3.4.4 Interviews

The interview was chosen because it gives the researcher room to follow up ideas, probe responses and to investigate inner motives and feelings as the interviewer is in direct contact with the interviewees (Bell, 1987). In addition, Seliger and Shohamy (1989) point out, "Interviews are personalised and therefore permit a level of in-depth information gathering, free response, and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other procedures" (p. 166). It is also more adaptable because it gives the researcher room to reformulate questions according to situations. It also ensures qualitative comparability between interviewees when results are organised and discussed.

The aim of the interviews was to find out the students' perception of the use of social language learning strategies in group work and the outcomes of using social language learning strategies in group work. Two students were selected from the fairly proficient group and another two were selected from the low proficiency group for this based on their willingness to be interviewed. The four focal informants

were interviewed individually to elicit individual views. Further the interviewer was careful not to prompt or influence the interviewees.

The interviews were also tape recorded for future reference. The recorded data will give the researcher the opportunity to counter check the information obtained to ensure accuracy of the qualitative data. In addition, the recorded data will also retain much of its original forms in terms of the expressions or language used. Natural language maximises accessibility to non- specialist readers when the data is presented (Walker, 1985).

The interview was a semi-structured interview. According to Seliger and Shohamy (1989),

In 'semi- open' interviews there are specific core questions determined in advance from which the interviewer branches off to explore in- depth information, probing according to the way the interview proceeds, and allowing elaboration, within limits. The 'semi- structured' interview consists of specific and defined questions determined beforehand, but at the same time it allows some elaboration in the questions and answers. (p. 137)

It was based on standardised open-ended questions (as categorised by Patton 1990, in Best and Kahn, 1993). The students were asked the same questions in the same predetermined order (see Appendix 8) to help the interviewer to keep "on track", to enable comparisons to be made across participants. A few general questions were included to get the interviewees "started off" and then they were lead to the main questions (see Appendix 8, No 3 – 7) which were open-ended questions. Open- ended questions were structured to give the interviewees the opportunity to respond freely as they are not "tied down" to a set of predetermined responses.

3.4.5 Questionnaires

A questionnaire was used because it yields responses, which can be readily condensed and quantified. It also enables the researcher to make quantitative comparison between the two groups of learners (fairly proficient and of low proficiency). The questionnaires in this study were aimed at obtaining a more focused response on the social language learning strategies learners used in group work and the outcomes of using the social language learning strategies in group work. Ten students were selected to respond to the questions: five from the fairly proficient group and another five from the low proficiency group.

The questionnaire was developed using a set of open and closed questions. The open items (see Appendix 9, 1b, 2b, 6, 8), gives the students the opportunity to express their views or perceptions. The closed questions (see Appendix 9, No 1a, 2b, 3, 4a, 5, 7) requires the respondents to tick the appropriate response following the questions. Such questions are suitable when the information sought are either factual or demands the expression of an opinion. Two forms of closed questions were used. Firstly, the dichotomous single item question, which can be used for response alternatives such as “Yes” or “No”. Secondly, the multiple response from which was based on a four point rating scale (see Appendix 9, No 5) and a five point rating scale (see Appendix 9, No 7) with a range of possible responses was used.

The questionnaire was administered to all students at the same time to ensure each student received the same set of instructions and to ensure that the students did not discuss or compare their responses. The researcher did not prompt the

students to ensure objectivity. It was also emphasised that the students did not have to write their names on the questionnaires in order to ensure anonymity.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the field notes, audio taped recordings and interviews were analysed in the same manner. At different stages of the analysis the researcher identified, categorised and sorted the relevant segments of the text according to an organising scheme. Then, the researcher looked out for commonalties, regularities, or recurring patterns across the various data texts.

The researcher also used the inductive procedure to analyse the data where a set of pre- determined categories, which was derived from the research questions and literature review was applied to the data obtained. According to Selinger and Shohamy (1989), the pre-determined category leads to refinement of the categories and the discovery of new commonalties or patterns. The data were analysed and coded according to the following categories: asking questions, cooperating with peers and proficient users of the language and empathising with others.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed based on a frequency count as to how often a phenomenon occurs. In analysing the results, the researcher computed the frequencies for the selection of each statement by each group and compared the two groups of learners with varying levels of proficiency. Students' work were compared to analyse the difference between individual work and group work in terms of the quality of work.

3.6 Conclusion

Five methods of data collection: participant observation, audio taped recordings, teaching learning materials and students' work, interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data in order to get insights into this study. The data obtained formed the basis for a description of key aspects of the findings.