

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodology of this investigation into student attitudes towards an English course at a five-star hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The investigation involved 10 Thai hotel employees and an instructor. The approach to this investigation was qualitative. One form of qualitative study is the case study. Merriam (1988, p.27) describes a case study as an '*intense, holistic description and analysis of single instance, phenomenon, or social unit.*' This study is intensive as it studies students' attitudes over a period of time, from pre-course to end of course with additional questionnaires collected in between. The instructor also noted down participants' comments and behavior during the course of study to further add to the data supplied by the participants. The participants also had one on one interviews with the instructor. Finally the training manager of the hotel was also interviewed to complete the teaching triangle within normal ESP courses of Students-Instructor-Stakeholder. Below is an explanation and description of the methodology, beginning with participants. The data collection instruments and data analysis are also described.

Participants

In this case study, a group of employees from a five-star hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand were taught. The participants were given a personal set of questions to fill in to obtain data and background information for the instructor (Appendix A). The number of participants in the study was ten. The group consisted of nearly equal amounts of males

and females. There were six males and four females on the course. Their age range was between 24-28 years of age. This sample is I believe fairly typical of participants in many ESP courses, namely younger employees who need English training for their work or occupations.

Their English proficiency ranged from false beginner to low-intermediate. One participant was of nearly of intermediate level. One participant was a false beginner. In the set of student questions most of the participants' answered that their English level was 'so so' with only one participant responding that their level was 'medium'. Clearly then all the participants would benefit from additional English instruction at work.

The majority of the participants (8) were from the Food and Beverage department, two participants were employed in the Audio/Visual department. The Food and Beverage employees obviously have the most contact with guests, and in their student questions there was a clear majority of respondents (7/8) stating they wanted to study general English rather than hotel English. Two of the participants were bartenders, and therefore speak to guests daily. These participants clearly benefited from their positions having a good command of conversational English in class. Several other Food and Beverage participants showed good communicative ability and their jobs were in-house dining and restaurant staff (waiters and waitresses) however, some of these participants said that they didn't get the chance to practice much English with the guests, with communication being for purely functional reasons.

Although most of them have received several years of English education at elementary, middle, and high school it is interesting to note that the Audio/Visual participants only counted their English instruction at college or university. This suggests that traditional English instruction in school was found wanting. The remaining participants all gave answers ranging from twelve to nine years.

All of the participants had received higher education of some form. The two participants from the Audio/Visual department went to technical college. The Food and Beverage employees had studied a variety of majors at university, including English, Human Resources Management, Tourism Industry, and Business English. It was to be expected that the participants would have received a university education as working in a five-star hotel is a prestigious position in Thailand. Learning English at university level is also considered to be desirable in Thailand (Smyth, 2002).

One of the main reasons for having English skills in Thailand is tourism. Tourism in Thailand is a huge industry generating almost a trillion baht in revenue in 2007, and the number of foreign visitors approached 15 million in 2007 (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2008).

The participants are therefore motivated to continue their English studies to gain further opportunity in this important sector of the Thai economy. Clearly in many hotels, you would not expect to find all the employees having had a university education. It furthermore would be expected that if the participants had been from Housekeeping or perhaps Kitchen staff that not all would have received a university/college education. Therefore the participants advanced education has to be taken into account.

Most of them perceived their best skill in English as speaking (8/10) with one participant believing reading was her best skill, and one participant believed listening was her best skill. Most of them wanted to improve their speaking and listening skills. Clearly in the hotel and tourism industry these are the English skills they would need and use the most.

Research has found that as much as 40-50% of our communication time is spent in listening (Gilman & Moody, 1984) and in their interactions with hotel guests that percentage may be even higher. It is thus important that participants understand the

purposes of the texts they were studying in class, for example whether they are interactional or transactional.

The participants were questioned on the distinction between the transactional and functional nature of hotel English and the more interactional nature of general English, they understood the distinction and stated that they were happy doing tasks and activities for both. Vandergrift (1999, p.172) stated '*knowing the reason of the text will help students to determine what to listen for and therefore which processes to activate.*' So their perceived needs and wants are I believe correct and agree with research by Flowerdew & Miller (2005) that speaking and listening skills are of main concern for many L2 learners.

Grammar was seen as the least favorite thing to study in class. This might be because '*the grammatical structure of Thai is very different from that of English*' (Smyth, 2002, p.355). This is also a common fact for many L2 learners (Uchibori et al, 2006). Consequently these participants are a fairly representative and typical group of L2 learners studying an English course for purposes of increased communicative ability at work.

Nearly all of them stated they had had little English training at work. However, all the participants had received at least one course in English instruction prior to this course. Most of the participants expressed a willingness to study English outside of class with the medium amount of hours being 2.4 per week. It should be noted though that the participants worked long hours at the hotel with 52 ½ hours a week being a standard (10.5 hour shifts x 5). Thus in reality it was hard to expect a lot of outside class time being devoted to study.

The participants were responsive in class and approached tasks and activities willingly and enthusiastically. I noted that for writing activities they took longer to achieve their tasks, this is evidence that they indeed lacked good writing skills. As was previously

mentioned the participants wanted the most practice in listening and speaking and classroom instruction (especially in the ESP component) focused on these two skill areas. In the general English component there were several long readings and I made the decision to include these for reading practice and development of their reading skills and strategies.

Also important for successful classes is group interaction as Dörnyei & Murphey (2003, p.3) state in a good group *'time spent there is a constant source of success and satisfaction for teachers and learners alike.'* Therefore I was pleased to note that the participants worked very well together and the sense of a group identity and group purpose was evident in all classes. Furthermore the participants shared a common ground (Clark, 1996) being of the same background, socio-economic class, age and occupation which further supported group interaction and conversations within the class (Carroll, 1999).

There was no noticeable bias on seating arrangements perceived by the teacher. The participants chose seats based on vacancy and not on personal relationships or gender which frequently occurs in L2 learning classrooms.

Sometimes individual participants arrived late for class, this was due to the nature of their job roles, frequently the instructor started classes later than scheduled and finished later due to this factor. Time spent on waiting for participants to arrive was focused on small talk and personalized questions from the instructor to participants. Therefore some of them had an opportunity to 'warm up' before the actual classes began.

There was some absenteeism during the course, initially the instructor thought it was because the participants lacked motivation to study, but the training manager said it was because some participants had days off scheduled or the hotel was busy and they could not find the time to come to class.

The entire group of participants expressed satisfaction that there would be no formal testing at the end of the course. This would come as no surprise. Therefore a negative aspect of this is that their extrinsic motivation to study hard during the course was lessened. On a positive point clearly there would be no backwash, which is '*the influence examinations have on teaching which leads up to them*' (Bloomer et al, 2005, p.236). Also positively, anxiety would be reduced, and the participants were observed to be free of anxiety for all their classes. Indeed I informed them I wanted them to be as relaxed as possible for their classes, believing that language learning should not be seen as a 'chore' but rather as an opportunity for present or future communication.

For the purposes of this study the participants were assigned an alphabetical letter ranging from A to J. These letters were assigned to ensure student anonymity. For purposes of segregation students A-D were female. F-I were male employees in the Food and Beverage department and J-K were the two Audio/Visual employees. In the results section students' comments will be noted using these descriptors.

Instruments

To ensure validity and reliability of results there were several methods of gathering data. This triangulation of data and means of acquisition gave the researcher a large amount of information.

1) Before the course started the participants were given a small Perceived Needs Analysis to complete (Appendix B).

This Needs Analysis (NA) was designed to find out participants' attitudes toward the course, and the two components ESP and general English. It also asked them questions on their perceived wants. They were asked to rate 13 statements using a Likert scale. The

results were examined and compared with the final questionnaire (Appendix C) given at the end of the course and the final class discussion.

2) Every two weeks there was a class questionnaire on the course (Appendix D).

This short questionnaire was used to gauge participants' attitudes towards the class they had studied, as each class focused entirely on one component; that is one class was taught using either the general English material or the hotel English material, the results were used to compare the two components. There were 15 statements assessed by the participants using a Likert scale. It was decided to give out these class questionnaires every two weeks to avoid participant fatigue in answering the questions.

3) After each class there were open-ended questions to answer in the form of an open class discussion (Appendix E). These questions were asked by the instructor with participants answered recorded in the teacher's diary. To alleviate participant fatigue from questionnaires it was decided to hold an informal conversation with participants about the classes and course using the open ended questions as a springboard for discussion.

4) During and after the class, the instructor kept a teaching diary with notes and observations. These notes were based on fact, the participants recorded comments and also the instructor's perceptions on what he saw and heard.

Participants' comments were noted down here especially regarding their attitudes as to the syllabus and classes. Also participants' performance of tasks and activities were noted. During informal discussions the teacher took notes on what the participants said

5) At the end of the teaching schedule in week eight, there was an extended class for completion of the final questionnaire.

6) The training manager of the hotel was interviewed and recorded and the results written up, this was to examine the stake holder's feelings toward the teaching of general English.

Data Collection Procedures

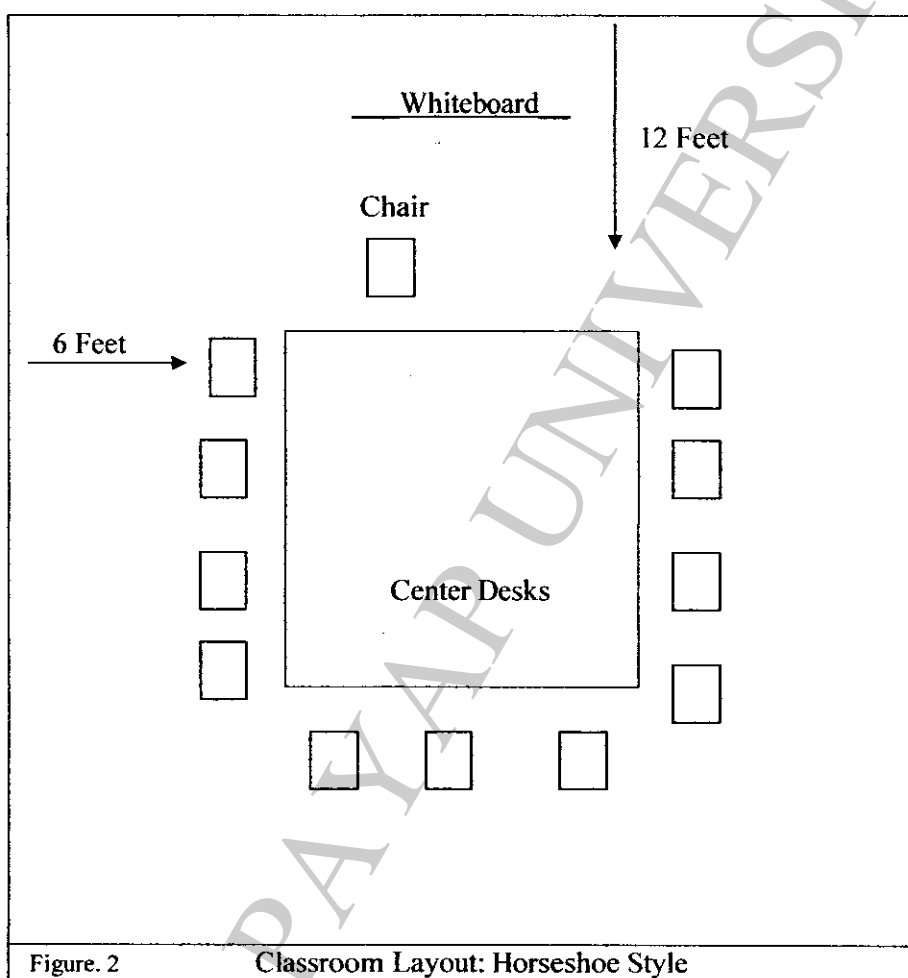
Data was gathered after each of the 16: 1 ½ hour classes. After each class there was an open ended discussion of the class about what was taught and practiced in class. There was a period of 15 minutes devoted to the open-ended discussion questions and completion of class questionnaires. The teacher noted down participants' comments in the teacher's diary. Every second week the participants also filled out the class questionnaire. Participants were also encouraged to talk about or give their feelings on the class, especially with regard to affective feelings, motivation and enjoyment. As the data collected was mainly in the form of participants' speech and the teacher's note taking data was assessed by qualitative means.

The first classes started at the beginning of May, 2009 and concluded at the end of June, 2009. There were 16 taught sessions, consisting of 12 hours English for Specific Purposes and 12 hours of English for General Purposes. The final class on the 26th of June also included an analysis and feedback of the whole course. Participants carried out an extended final questionnaire (Appendix C) at this class relating to the previous 8 weeks of classes.

The course was taught using two textbooks. A general English component taught using material from a general English Pre-intermediate textbook 'Straightforward'. An English for Specific Purposes component taught using units from a Pre-intermediate Hotel and Catering textbook 'Highly Recommended'. Additional warm-up and other materials were supplied by the instructor. A sample lesson plan from the classes is provided (Appendix F). The course content was negotiated, with the participants deciding what units from each book they would like to study during the eight weeks. The final choice of units studied was decided by the instructor based upon the student's input. Eight units

were covered from the ESP book and eight sections from the general English book in the time available for study.

Classes took place in the training room of a five-star hotel. The training room was adequately equipped with a whiteboard and was large enough to teach communicative classes. That is, there was room for all types of activities, pair work, group work and mingling. The classroom layout shown in Figure 2 (shown next page) was horseshoe style which has been shown to be effective in communicative and modern language teaching (Harmer, 2006; Scrivener, 2005).



Data Analysis

Data analysis was on-going weekly, with a write up of each week's classes and a comparison of the specific purposes class (hotel English) and the general English class. This comparison came from the note taking carried out in the class discussions and also from the class questionnaires that were completed every two weeks. As this was a qualitative study I compared the results using the students' opinions and the instructor's observations. All data was assessed mainly by qualitative means. At the end of the teaching period, the instructor collated all the various data, including questionnaire results, perceived needs analysis, final questionnaire, participants' comments, stakeholders comment's and instructor's thoughts. From these sources the research questions were discussed and answered.

I used my eight years of experience in instructing, teaching and working with students to assess the data and processed the information with a minimum of bias. Therefore the results are a collation and summation of the input I received from all areas of the course. I attempted to layout the information in a clear and concise fashion focusing on the participants' but with my input and finally that of the stakeholder (the hotel training manager) to gain my results and put forward possible recommendations for future ESP courses.