CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.1   Introduction

In this study, I used qualitative research methods to examine the notion of agency, and how it can inform our understanding of language use, particularly as it is used in chat, and English learning outside the classroom. According to Giddens (1984), two alternative research strategies are possible in structuration theory: institutional analysis and the analysis of strategic conduct. In institutional analysis, the actions of actors are 'bracketed' and the focus is on the structural characteristics of institutions, whereas in the analysis of strategic conduct, the focus is on how actors draw on structures in social practices, and the structural properties are assumed methodologically to be given. It is important to note that this bracketing is strictly methodological and that both approaches are meant to be complemented with an understanding of the duality of structure, that is, the mutual dependence of agency and structure. In this study, I focused on the strategic conduct of the participants, providing a 'thick description' of their actions (Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006; Ryle, 1971) while attempting to avoid explanations that see these actions in purely subjective or objective terms (Bourdieu, 1990).

According to Creswell (2003), qualitative research has the following characteristics: it takes place in the natural setting, it uses multiple methods, it is emergent and it is fundamentally interpretive. In qualitative research, the researcher goes to the participant's home or office, which is not disturbed any more than is

necessary, and conducts the research there. This enables the researcher to develop a detailed description of people's behavior and the context in which they act. Researchers generally use several methods that are interactive, such as observations, interviews and analyses of documentary evidence, including electronic data. Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly predefined. As different aspects emerge during the study, the research questions and data collection process might be changed or refined. There is "a cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformulation and back" (p. 183). As Orlikowski and Hoffman (1997) noted with regard to technological change, although the research needs to be planned, the plan should be seen as a guide rather than a blueprint. Finally, the researcher interprets and draws theoretical conclusions based on the data. These interpretations are necessarily filtered through the researcher's personal lens, his or her social and intellectual bias (Wacquant, 1992), and the researcher needs to be aware of this.

'Thick description' has been described as "one of the most important concepts in the lexicon of the qualitative researcher" (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 538). Initially used by Ryle (1971), and subsequently popularized by Geertz (1973), "thick description refers to the researcher's task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context" (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543). Geertz (1973) argues that most anthropological data are "really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (p. 9), and so to help the reader evaluate the author's interpretations, the context under which these interpretations were made must be thickly described. In addition to describing the context thickly, the researcher needs to describe the participants' actions so richly that readers have the feeling that they are experiencing the events being described.

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Furthermore, "thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of the participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them" (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543). Thick description promotes thick interpretation, which leads to thick meaning of the findings.

According to Bourdieu (1990), "of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism" (p. 25). Subjectivism examines the 'taken for granted', the everyday lived experience of individuals, which "however illusory it may seem from the 'objective' viewpoint, remains perfectly certain, *qua* experience" (p. 25). However, it ignores the social conditions of this experience, namely the structures, both external and internal, that make it possible. Objectivism, on the other hand, due to the fact that it detemporalizes and totalizes practices, fails to grasp how they are understood phenomenologically by the individuals involved.

To show the differences between these two approaches, Bourdieu (1977) provides the example of how gift exchanges have been represented by Lévi-Strauss (1987) and Mauss (1989). "'Phenomenological' analysis and objectivist analysis bring to light two antagonistic principles of gift exchange: the gift as experienced, or at least, meant to be experienced, and the gift as seen from outside" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 5). For the agents involved, exchanges of gifts, words or challenges are made up of unpredictable and irreversible events. The observer, though, sees the sequences of actions as reversible, as 'cycles of reciprocity'. According to Bourdieu, it is in the interaction between objectivist and subjectivist accounts that we are to understand these social practices (Grenfell & James, 1998). "The temporal structure of gift exchange, which objectivism ignores, is what makes possible the coexistence of two opposing truths, which defines the full truth of the gift" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 5).

Although most gift exchanges are reciprocal, the interval between giving a gift and receiving the counter-gift introduces uncertainty into the equation and the possibility that events might not proceed according to the mechanical laws of the 'cycle of reciprocity'. This interval should not be too short or too long, and to manage this process successfully agents need to act creatively and strategically, an aspect that is ignored by objectivist accounts, in line with the 'feel for the game' they have acquired.

3.2   Participants and Setting

The main participant in this study is a 21-year-old student who I will call Maria. The other participants were Maria's interlocutors, all of whom are Burmese, in the chat conversations that were analyzed. Maria comes from Burma/Myanmar and belongs to the Karen ethnic group, one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Myanmar (Watkins, 2007), so while she was growing up, she used Karen at home and Burmese at school and when she talked with her friends. She usually speaks Karen when conversing with another Karen person. She now feels, though, that Burmese is the language she speaks the best, but when she speaks Burmese she says that Burman people can easily recognize from her accent that she is not an ethnic Burman. She grew up in Yangon, the capital of Myanmar, and is currently living in Thailand, where she has recently finished her undergraduate studies in English. Two of her elder brothers now live abroad, while her eldest brother lives in Yangon with her sister and her father. Maria's mother died five years ago.

She started learning English when she was in Kindergarten, and in secondary school she had to learn science and math in English. She graduated from secondary school when she was 15 and then studied at a learning center in Yangon for approximately one year. At the learning center, she studied English and computer studies. In the computer studies lessons, she learned how to use Microsoft Word and

Excel, but she was not given any instruction in how to use the Internet, which is something she learned after coming to Thailand. She now uses the Internet for communicating with her family and friends, using email, instant messaging and voicemail, research, reading the news, watching movies, and listening to songs.

Maria came to Thailand to study English at a university there shortly before she turned 17, and the decision to do so was made when she was still only 16. Maria says that this decision was made for her and she had little choice in the matter. One of her teachers, who after her mother's death acted as her guardian, felt that Maria would get a better education in Thailand and made all the arrangements, including sponsorship, for her. The decision was made easier, though, by the fact that Maria had missed the deadline to apply for any of the Burmese universities, although she feels that she still would have come to study in Thailand even if she had not missed the deadline. Although it was her first trip abroad, Maria says that she was not worried about coming to Thailand, and when she arrived she was quite excited about being in a new place. She chose to study English partly because she was hoping to become an English teacher and partly because there were only four majors available, and she did not feel as confident in her ability to complete any of the other three. She also felt that English would offer her better job opportunities in the future.

The main reason for choosing this participant was that she is a successful language learner, which was evident from her use of English in the interview and the chat transcripts, who has engaged in many extracurricular activities that have helped improve her English. She has also spent much time chatting on the Internet and so is an experienced user of this medium. Furthermore, the process of learning how to chat, and the difficulties she faced, would hopefully still be relatively fresh in her mind as she did not use the Internet to chat before coming to Thailand.

3.3   Methodological Framework

The research consisted of one semi-structured interview, a discourse analysis of several chat conversations, and a final semi-structured interview based on issues arising from the first interview and analysis of the chat conversations. Initially, Maria provided transcripts of seven chat conversations, all of them with real-life friends, that had taken place on 9 July, 2009 between 2:27pm and 5:02pm. So that I could analyze a more varied selection, a request was made for transcripts of conversations with people for the first time. Maria then sent me two such conversations, one which had taken place on 9 May, 2009 and the other on 28 July, 2009. Maria was interviewed at the university, and as she is proficient in English, the interviews were conducted in English.

In the initial interview, Maria was asked questions about her background, her reasons for coming to Thailand, her motives for learning English, the methods she uses to improve her English outside the classroom, her reasons for chatting, and how she learned how to chat. This information was examined to provide an agentic description of the factors that have contributed to her becoming so proficient in English, that is, a description that recognizes the social and material conditions which she faced and looks at how she engaged with them.

Much of the information concerning how Maria uses chat, though, is probably taken for granted and exists below the level of consciousness (Bourdieu, 1990; Gomm, 2004), and that is why I also needed to analyze her use of chat by examining several chat transcripts. All of these transcripts were of conversations that had occurred previously, and so Maria was unaware that they would be studied when she engaged in them. In this analysis, I concentrated on how the interlocutors draw on rules and resources to achieve mutual understanding (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984;

Zimmerman & Boden, 1991) and to pursue their own projects (Long, 2001), paying particular attention to context (Austin, 1962; Duranti, 1992; Malinowski, 1923; Rommetveit, 1971; Wittgenstein, 1958) and contextualization (Bauman, 1992; Gumperz, 1992), framing (Goffman, 1974; Kendon, 1992; Snow & Benford, 2005), and code-switching (Auer, 1998; Gumperz, 1982).

Any use of language is embedded within a particular context. An utterance, therefore, "becomes only intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation" (Malinowski, 1923, p. 306). Wittgenstein (1958) provides the example of someone uttering the words 'Five slabs', and asks how we know whether this is an order, for someone else to fetch five slabs, or a report, in response to a question. Although the order would probably be said in a different tone of voice to the report, it could also be said in the same tone of voice, and so an interpretation of this utterance would need to be made in the context of the particular activity in which it is embedded. Rommetveit (1971) makes a similar point with regard to the associative possibilities of words; "the 'water' I encounter in a poem about a thirsty and nostalgic Norwegian sailor in Hong Kong is thus distinctively different from the 'water' in the chemistry book" (p. 23). In any conversation, it is important to note that not only is there a broad, social context in which the conversation takes place, there is also a narrower, local context, which has been established by the previous utterances (Cicourel, 1992). Both of these types of context, therefore, were addressed in the analysis of chat transcripts.

Contextualization refers to the use of signs, both verbal and nonverbal, to relate what is said to an interlocutor's background knowledge (Gumperz, 1992). Gumperz argues that contextualization relies on cues that "make salient certain phonological or lexical strings *vis-à-vis* other similar units" (p. 232). In the analysis of the chat transcripts, I looked at how the interlocutors contextualized the conversations

through code choice, choice of lexical forms and formulaic expressions, and the use of quasi-nonverbal cues.

Framing refers to the process by which a particular situation is defined by the participants, and "rules of irrelevance" (Goffman, 1961, p. 19) are established. In order to understand each other, the participants in a situation need to agree on how it is defined. They will thereby know what information is relevant, or irrelevant. Depending on the situation, the definition of it will need to be negotiated and contested to a greater or lesser extent. Even in the most routine of day-to-day activities, "there remains considerable room for uncertainty" (Kendon, 1992, p. 327), meaning that some collaborative work is still needed. In addition, even though there are social norms concerning these activities, they still need to be enacted by knowledgeable agents.

There was a certain amount of code-switching in the chat transcripts. Code-switching involves the switching from one code, be it a language, dialect or register, to another, or the mixing of codes, sometimes even within short utterances (Wardhaugh, 2002). It often occurs subconsciously (Gumperz, 1982), and it seems to be used to achieve a variety of communicative goals, such as an assertion of power, declaration of solidarity, expression of identity, and so on. There might also be practical reasons related to a lack of ability, or perceived lack of ability, to convey one's message successfully in one of the languages. In CMC, there is the additional question of the availability of fonts. With Burmese, when using a computer that does not have the necessary fonts, the interlocutors also need to decide whether to use English or Burglish.

3.4 Validity and Generalizability

In order to optimize the validity of this study, two strategies were used: thick description and triangulation. Thick description has been addressed in an earlier part of this chapter, and triangulation refers to the use of different data sources of information (Creswell, 2003). This study involved an analysis of two interviews and nine chat conversations, seven of which were between friends and two of which were between strangers. The second interview was used to clarify certain points arising from the first interview and the initial analysis of the chat transcripts. Much of the analysis of the chat conversations, though, involved examining the tacit understandings that seem to underpin much day-to-day existence, and as the participants are not likely to be aware of these understandings, it was not possible to ask them how accurate the analysis was. In this case, I relied on providing a thick description of the conversations and the contexts under which they took place. This will allow the readers to make what Stake (2005) calls *"naturalistic generalization[s]"* (p. 454). These are generalizations made on the basis of how the description of the vicarious experience of the participants in the study interacts with the readers' previous knowledge. Stake argues that providing readers with a thick description is essential if they are to make naturalistic generalizations.

In his description of an actor-oriented approach to research, Long (2003) argues that it is not the purpose of such an approach to provide a universal theory of society or social change; rather, it is meant to provide a framework for understanding how social forms emerge and are reworked in people's day-to-day lives. Similarly, the aim of this study is to investigate how the notion of agency can further our understanding of everyday human action, particularly with regard to the use of language and language learning outside the classroom, and it is not to provide any

totalizing representations that run the risk of lumping people "together into homogeneous masses beneath a welter of hollow clichés and sterile words" (Havel, 1989; cited in Sayer, 1991, p. ix).