

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Chapter Three discusses the methodology undertaken to meet the objectives of the research study. The following topics concerning the research methodology are presented in this chapter: purpose of the research, participants of the study, negotiation of entry, location of study, instruments in the research apparatus, processes for data analysis, and construction of the narrative account.

3.1 Purpose of the Research

The use of STIVELFs is a highly prevalent, though under-researched, phenomenon in the field of TESOL. For that reason, this research study sought to provide a contextualized, narrative account of a project involving STIVELFs. Further, this study sought answers to the following two questions:

1. What are the needs of the short-term international volunteers relevant to facilitating English language learning in the local context?
2. What roles of responsibility do the various participants take on to address the needs of the short-term international volunteers?

Insights from the findings of this research study contributed to the drafting of a developmental tool useful to stakeholders of English language learning projects that make use of short-term international volunteers.

3.2 Population and Sample for the Study

The total population of short-term international volunteer English language facilitators is an inherently difficult one to measure, let alone study, on a macro-level. First, by implication of definition, the population is both fleeting and elusive: the volunteers' roles span a short duration of time, and the individuals soon return to their homeland far away from their site of volunteer service. Second, the activities of many volunteers remain undocumented and unheralded, so an investigation based on a search for volunteers who do publicize their activities may result in a limited, biased account. Third, the total population of STIVELFs is widely diverse in terms of purpose and background. Some scoping of the population is thus warranted in order to enhance the meaningfulness of research for any particular segment of the volunteer population.

These are but a few reasons to consider an intensive and focused study of one particular volunteer group. While a narrower study of this kind limits generalizability, the depth of data gathered in this intensive study makes for a more

riveting account. The in-depth nature of the research design also affords the opportunity to draw from numerous participant perspectives. In this study, the participants have been organized into three categories, based on geography.

3.2.1 International Participants

One key group of participants was the set of 11 individuals who comprised the international volunteer group. Members of this group traveled from their various hometowns across the United States of America to Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand. The volunteer project was designed as one in which group members participated in service activities as an expression of their religious faith. Various volunteer activities were organized for the trip, including: setting up a site with free health care advice and over-the-counter medicine provisions; teaching English in a village school; and organizing a weekend children's Bible program. The volunteers were assigned different primary roles of responsibility for the trip. In particular interest for this study, four of the international participants were charged with the responsibility of being *lead teachers* in classrooms at the village school. The other international participants took on tasks as *classroom assistants* at the village school. Also among the international participants was the *group leader*, who had prior experience volunteering and organizing volunteer trips in Thailand. The international participants are introduced more thoroughly in the narrative account of Chapter Four.

3.2.2 Regional Participants

Another key group of participants was classified in this study as regional participants. This distinction identifies individuals who reside in Thailand, though not primarily in the village where the volunteer project took place.

Included among the regional participants was an American man who, for the purposes of this study, is referred to as the *ministry coordinator*. The ministry coordinator's educational and work background was primarily in the ministry of the church. At the start of the volunteer service project, he had lived in Thailand for approximately 1.5 years, serving as a national coordinator in Thailand for religious activities affiliated with his church body in the U.S.A. Prior to the volunteer group's arrival to Thailand, the ministry coordinator had been the primary link for communication between the international volunteer group and local participants in the village in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, where the weeklong volunteer projects took place. In particular, he maintained close communication with the volunteer group leader in the planning stages of the volunteer project.

The professors and students of a seminary in Chiang Rai Province were also regional participants. This group consisted of three seminary professors (the wife of one of the professors also accompanied the group) and 10 adult male students. The professors and students, all ethnic Hmong, partnered with the international volunteer participants at the site of the local village and took on various roles of responsibility throughout the duration of the volunteers' stay in Thailand.

3.2.3 Local Participants

Individuals residing in the local village where the volunteer project took place were classified in this study as local participants. Of central focus for this study were the local staff and students of the village school. As insiders to the local context, they provided valuable information about the situation of the local school, which, in turn,

framed some of the particular needs of the international volunteers. More than 100 students received English instruction from the international volunteer group. These students came from two fifth-grade (1.5) classrooms, two sixth-grade (1.6) classrooms, and one seventh-grade (1.1) classroom.

3.2.4 Researcher as Participant

Based on geography, the researcher could be classified as a regional participant of the study. However, the different nature of the researcher's participation in the context of the study warrants a separate classification for the role of researcher.

Spradley (1980) has identified five degrees on a spectrum of participant observation: non-participant (not present at the scene); passive (a bystander at the scene); moderate (maintaining a balance between being an insider and outsider); active (seeking to do what other people are doing to gain acceptance and learn more fully); and complete (participating in a scene which one already commonly participates). The amount of participation that can be achieved is largely contingent upon the interactions with the group participants and their reception of the researcher. In general, the researcher made efforts to be a passive participant observer inside the English classrooms. In other aspects of engagement in the volunteer project, the researcher sought a moderate participant-observer role. In daily life aspects outside the realm of volunteer project responsibilities, the researcher aimed for a role of active participant observation. As a participant observer, the researcher focused most of his time accompanying the international volunteer group, while simultaneously seeking to gain the insights of the regional and local participants.

3.3 Negotiation of Entry

The researcher, having been acquainted with the ministry coordinator for approximately 2.5 years at the time of the field study, had received an open invitation to participate in the volunteer project. This initial invitation was a major contributing factor for the desire to use this particular volunteer engagement as the basis for research. The researcher, a graduate student in TESOL with four years of experience in Thailand at the time of the field study, offered to take on roles of assistance (e.g., training and orienting the volunteers upon arrival) per request of the international volunteer group. The ministry coordinator forwarded the researcher's plan (including objectives of the study) and offer of assistance to the volunteer group leader for her consideration.

Approximately six weeks prior to the volunteers' arrival to Thailand, the volunteer group leader sent correspondence to the researcher, agreeing to the researcher's request to use this international volunteer project as the basis for the research study. In reply to the researcher's offer to take on assisting roles during the project, the group leader suggested to wait until meeting one another and getting an overall sense of the situation before taking on any specific duties. The group leader further notified the international volunteer group about the presence of a researcher on the volunteer trip. Later, she indicated that one of the volunteers expressed concern about being observed in the English language classroom. Thus, great care had to be taken to put the international volunteer group members, particularly this concerned individual, at ease about the research process. Further, the researcher prepared to

make adaptations if any volunteers would be unwilling to participate in particular aspects of the research process.

The first direct correspondence between the researcher and the international volunteer participants (other than the group leader) was the introductory letter (see Appendix A) sent via email by the researcher two weeks prior to the international volunteers' arrival to Thailand.

3.4 Study Location

The heart of the research occurred at the public school of a village referred to by some as "Red Dirt Village," in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. This village, nearly entirely ethnic Hmong in population, is situated in a remote, mountainous area approximately three hours away from the provincial capital. It was reported that one of the members of the village church informed authorities at the school about the plan to host the free health care activities near the church. Hearing about this, authorities at the school extended their welcome for the volunteer group to teach English at the school as well. The volunteers conducted the health care activities near the grounds of the village church in the mornings. In the afternoons, the volunteers led an English program at the local school, a few minutes' walk down the hill from the church.

The collection of research data also took place outside the village. For one, questionnaire data was collected via email prior to the volunteers' arrival to Thailand. Also, the orientation of the international volunteers occurred on the day of the volunteers' arrival to Chiang Rai, Thailand, prior to their journey to the village. Moreover, when not engaged in volunteer activities, the international participants and some regional participants were generally at their place of lodging, approximately a twenty-minute drive up the mountain from the village (the seminary students were lodged at the village church).

3.5 Research Apparatus

This section explains the research apparatus generated to achieve the objectives of the research study. Various data collection instruments were employed in order to gather a triangulated set of data. Below is a description of each instrument in the research apparatus.

3.5.1 Pre-arrival Questionnaire

A pre-arrival questionnaire was distributed by email to the international volunteer participants. This questionnaire elicited participant responses under three broad themes: preparations for volunteer engagement, concerns about English language teaching, and background in language teaching and learning. The Likert scale incorporated in the second section of the questionnaire is based on the scale referred to in both Ganser's (1999) and Veenman's (1984) studies. Together with these two studies, research conducted by Hertzog (2002) and Schlusberg and Mueller (1995) further contributes to the items and categories included in the Likert-scale portion of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was drafted, piloted, and adapted from a preliminary study regarding volunteer teacher needs, conducted by the researcher. The pre-arrival questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

3.5.2 Post-experience Questionnaire

At the end of the five-day English teaching program, a post-experience questionnaire was administered to the international volunteer group. This questionnaire is divided into two themes: reflection on challenges in English language teaching, and reflection on the volunteer service in general. Many of the items in this questionnaire are closely related to the pre-arrival questionnaire, but reworded to elicit a post-experience response. For instance, instead of identifying *concerns* in the language classroom, the Likert scale on the post-experience questionnaire elicited feedback on the *problems* reported by volunteers throughout the teaching experience. Similar to the pre-arrival questionnaire, the design of the Likert-scale portion of this questionnaire was piloted in a previous study by the researcher. The post-experience questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

3.5.3 Student Questionnaire

On the final day of the teaching engagement, a questionnaire was distributed to the students who received English instruction from the international volunteer group. This Likert-scale questionnaire elicited student responses under three themes: English language need, learner motivation, and teaching evaluation. There are five statements on the questionnaire related to each of the three themes (a total of 15 statements on the questionnaire). The information collected from the students provided insights into the students' learning needs, which, in turn, offered a more thorough understanding of the needs of the volunteer teachers. The questionnaire was first drafted in English; it went through subsequent draft stages in Thai with the assistance of a team of Thai speakers familiar with research methods in TESOL. Moreover, the statements on the questionnaire were worded in a way that counteracted students' expectations that the "correct" response would be found on one particular side of the Likert scale. The Thai and English versions of the student questionnaire, along with a categorization of the questionnaire statements by theme, can be found in Appendix D.

3.5.4 Field Notes from Daily Observations

The researcher accompanied the international volunteer group beginning at the time of their arrival to the airport in Chiang Rai on Saturday, November 4 (two days prior to the first day of volunteer English teaching at the village school). The researcher parted ways with the international participants upon returning to the city of Chiang Rai on Sunday, November 13 (two days after the group completed their English teaching commitment). For the duration of the experience, the researcher as a participant observer took field notes relevant to identifying the needs of the volunteers. Field notes from daily observations were recorded in the ways described below.

3.5.4.1 "Need/Provisions Observations" Sheet

One of the daily observation tools created for this study was the "Needs/Provisions Observations" sheet. This sheet was designed for the researcher to take notes about the identification of needs among the international volunteer group, as well as which participant, if any, made provisions to meet the needs of the volunteers. This observation sheet can be found in Appendix E.

3.5.4.2 “Ethnographic Observations” Sheet

Another tool designed for daily observations in this study was the “Ethnographic Observations” sheet. Use of this observation sheet guided the researcher in the collection of data relevant to two areas in particular: motivations for participation as a volunteer, and awareness of the local teaching and learning context. The instrument also provided space to record notes about more generalized observations. The “Ethnographic Observations” sheet can be found in Appendix F.

3.5.4.3 Audio Field Notes

An audio recording device was also used as a tool to collect daily observations. The audio recordings were incorporated as a means to record the audio from live events as well as the researcher’s oral reports of significant observations and interactions.

3.5.5 Classroom Observations

The researcher made daily observations in the English language classrooms. The “Classroom Observations” sheet was created to focus the observations on collecting data relevant to the objectives of this research study. The observation tool provided space for notes about the presence and the need (in this context, the lack) of different aspects within the English language classroom. The aspects which focus on teacher traits were based loosely on Wilson’s (2009) guidelines for novice instructors. The classroom observation tool also provided space to take notes on the learning characteristics of the students, as well as space for other generalized notes. The researcher observed each English language classroom on at least two separate occasions during the week. The “Classroom Observations” sheet can be found in Appendix G.

3.5.6 Volunteer Teaching Reflection Journals

The international volunteer group members were provided with a notebook and were asked to keep a journal. There were limited constraints on what the volunteers should write; however, the volunteers were encouraged to write an account and reflection on the events of the day, particularly regarding their experiences in the English language classroom. The volunteers’ reflection journals were collected daily by the researcher. In return, the researcher replied each day to the volunteers’ entries. The researcher’s entries served as a means to offer suggestions to the volunteers based on their reported needs, as well as an opportunity to pose additional questions to the volunteers for their further reflection. At the conclusion of the volunteers’ activities in the local school, the journals were collected. After the field study, the researcher typed and saved the entries from each journal to a computer file, and later returned the journals back to the volunteers via post.

3.5.7 Researcher’s Daily Journal

The researcher also kept a daily journal to write a personal account of experiences, interactions, and reflections for the duration of the time on the field, both inside and outside the confines of the village school classroom. While this journal

served as a tool for data collection, it was also later transformed to be the window through which the narrative account is shared in Chapter Four.

3.5.8 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with personnel at the village school. Given that Thai is not the researcher's primary language of communication, some measures were taken in order to enhance the comprehensibility of these interviews. Prior to researcher's arrival to the site of the study, the interview questions were first generated in English and then translated into Thai with the assistance of a Thai speaker familiar with research methods in TESOL. Also, the interviews were audio-recorded to preserve the original language used by the interviewees. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with two members of the teaching staff at the local school. The interview questions, listed in both English and Thai, can be found in Appendix H.

3.5.9 Informal Interviews

The participant-observer role provided opportunities for the researcher to interact with the international volunteers, along with the regional and local participants. When fitting, the researcher took opportunities to interview participants informally to shed more light on the research questions. Often, the participants approached the researcher on their own accord to share their thoughts and concerns. The notes from these informal interviews were included in the researcher's daily journal and in field notes from daily observations.

3.5.10 Document Collection

The researcher collected documents relevant to achieving the research objectives. These documents included notifications and correspondence sent among project participants (e.g., preparatory information sent to volunteer participants via email). These documents also included items used on site at the local school (e.g., the English schedule used by the volunteers).

3.6 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis began in earnest upon the researcher's return from the field study. All collected data were typed and saved in electronic versions of the research instruments. In the case of data collected in the form of audio (i.e., field notes and semi-structured interviews), the audio files were summarized in written form.

A large portion of the collected data was qualitative in nature. The analysis of qualitative data within each research instrument followed a similar process. First, each research instrument was allocated a separate spreadsheet, and all collected data were coded in their respective spreadsheet. This allowed for easier comparison of data across days within a given research instrument. Then the coded data in each spreadsheet were thoroughly scoured for salient events and patterns in content. This process generated a listing of themes which emerged from each research instrument. These themes were further organized by their relation to the two central research questions.

The Likert-scale portions of the pre-arrival volunteer questionnaire, post-experience volunteer questionnaire, and student questionnaire underwent statistical analyses appropriate to the quantitative nature of the data. The use of computer-generated statistical tools aided the interpretation of the quantitative data collected from each of the three questionnaires. Since the Likert scales on the pre-arrival and post-experience questionnaires were closely related, results were also compared across the two questionnaires. Similar to the analysis of the qualitative data, the results of the quantitative analysis were also organized by their relation to the two central research questions.

Thus, a set of preliminary answers to the two central research questions was generated for each research instrument (see Appendix I for the answers to the research questions found within each respective research instrument). A comparison and amalgamation of these preliminary answers led to further data analysis, from which categories and overriding themes for each research question were generated. The results from this process of analysis shall be presented in Chapter Five.

3.7 Creating the Narrative Account

In accordance with the stated objectives of the research, the present study makes use of narrative to illuminate its exploration of a short-term international volunteer English teaching experience. The narrative account (Chapter Four) is presented from the vantage point of the researcher, who, of all the characters in the narrative, had the advantage of having purposefully sought out the individual and collective stories of the participants in the ways already described in this chapter.

The researcher's own journal, kept daily throughout the duration of his stay in the field, formed the basis for how the narrative was generated and consequently shared in Chapter Four. Some transformation of the "raw version" of the journal necessarily took place in order to generate this narrative account. In part, the editing decisions made during the transformation from research journal to research narrative reflected an awareness of four characteristics listed by Butler-Kisber (2010) as essential to a quality research text in the narrative mode: thoroughness, honesty, sensitivity, and usefulness to others. Moreover, changes were made in response to the critical stance of Nelson (2011) calling for narrative events "to be selected and rendered with care so that they are sufficiently clear yet richly complex" (p. 478). Among these careful editing decisions was the exclusion of the final two days of researcher interaction with the participants. While there are indeed "richly complex" stories that could be shared about these final two days, the ending of the narrative account presented in Chapter Four coincides with the final day of the volunteers' English teaching, the core of the research.

3.8 Summary of Methodology

This chapter has reported the methodology used in pursuit of the objectives of the research study. Rather than taking a research approach that aimed for wide generalizability of the findings, the research strived for a deep particularization within the phenomenon of STIVELFs. Figure 1 illustrates how the researcher sought out informed answers to the two central research questions through a triangulated approach (symbolized by the shape of a triangle). One way in which the research approach was triangulated was through pursuing the insights of the international, regional, and local participants, all of whom had a different "angle" or perspective to

share about the needs of the volunteers. Moreover, there was also a host of data collection instruments utilized to elicit data relevant to the research questions. The data collection instruments on the left side of the triangle represent the tools which the researcher used to collect data from his own participant vantage point. The instruments at the base of the triangle correspond to the strategies used for collecting data from other participant sources. The instruments on the right side of the triangle highlight the tools which incorporated the collection of quantitative data for answering the research questions. The researcher's arrow symbolizes the researcher's aim to view the insights gained from all of the aforementioned participants and data collection instruments as vital contributions towards answering the two research questions.

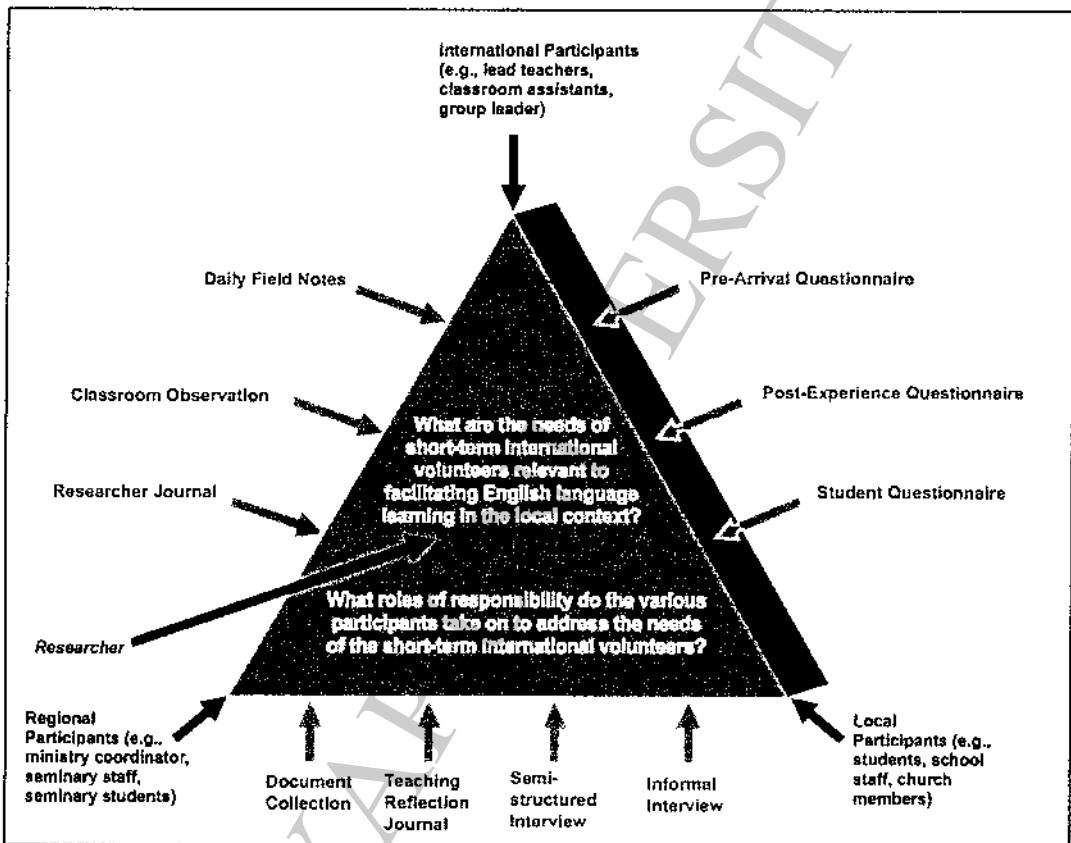


Figure 1 Summary of Research Methodology to Answer Research Questions

The data analysis process began with a detailed exploration of the data from each research instrument, from which answers to the research questions emerged and were further grouped in themes, as presented in Chapter Five. Meanwhile, the researcher's daily journal, incorporated as a component of the research apparatus, was tailored to provide the narrative research account in the next chapter.