

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodology of this investigation into teacher student interactions in the performance of recorded and transcribed picture story telling sessions. The investigation involved two Thai learners of English and a tutor, though each learner met separately with the tutor for private tutorial sessions. The interactions revolved around negotiation of the learners' ill-formed verb structures in the performance of narratives.

To measure the changes that were made and to understand the reasons for making these changes, both quantitative and qualitative tools were utilized. Quantitative tools were used to measure the products of the study, what changed, and these chiefly involved counting ill-formed and well-formed verb structures and calculating percentage shifts in changes. But quantitative tools are not enough if we want understand the reasons the changes were made. For this we need to turn to qualitative methodologies. One form a qualitative approach can take is the case study, an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1988, p.27). This study is intensive in that it involves an in-depth examination of learners engaged in interaction over time with a native teacher-speaker of English. It is holistic in that it involves an exploration of a variety of sociocultural influences and evaluates the validity of the answers to research questions using a collection of quantitative and qualitative instruments.

Elsewhere, Merriam lists three defining attributes of a qualitative case study: they are “*particularistic, heuristic, and descriptive*” (p.34). This case study is particularistic in that it applies the sociocultural framework to specific learners from a Thai background in a specific setting in Thailand. It is heuristic in that the transcription of the sessions and comments on the transcripts from the researcher provide a window into the sessions, illuminating the investigation. It is descriptive in that these transcripts and commentaries, along with interviews of the learners, provide a rich and “thick descriptive” (Geertz, cited in Li, 2005, p.35) account of the investigation. It also expands on the notion of “thick description”, in that the commentaries and interviews provide “thick explanation” (Watson-Gegeo, 2004, p. 340); they do more than describe but seek to explore all the plausible explanations for learner progression or regression.

An elaborated explanation and description of the methodology utilized in this study is provided below, beginning with a description of the setting and time frame, followed by a description of the participants, and the task rationale. Finally a description of the research questions, instruments, and procedures is provided, concluding with a summary and a graphic overview of the study.

Setting and Time Frame

This study was set in a Thai university in Northern Thailand. Meetings between the learners and the tutor/researcher took place in a classroom on the university campus. The learners and the tutor/researcher met twice a week; variance depended on the schedule and convenience of the learners. Each session lasted between 15 minutes and 45 minutes. The shorter sessions involved a rehearsal, followed by a task performance. The longer

sessions involved learner correction of their ill-formed verb structures on a transcript of their story telling performances as well as tutor/researcher and learner negotiation of the transcript. Six meetings or sessions took place between the tutor/researcher and the learners. Following a one-month break, a seventh meeting took place for a final, delayed task performance.

Participants

The participants were two Thai learners of English and an experienced teacher of English from America. The Thai learners are given the pseudonyms "Pen" and "Aum" in this study. Both learners are 19-year-old sophomores majoring in English Communication at their university. Both learners had studied English earlier in secondary school, though neither learner had taken conversational English at a private language school. The program at their university included courses in conversation (as well as language exchange meetings with foreign students on campus, arranged through the conversation program) reading and writing, as well as a study of linguistics with a focus on syntax, morphology and phonology. Both learners hoped to work in some capacity where English would be utilized on the job, though neither learner had decided specifically on what career paths to take. In general, learning English is considered prestigious in Thailand (Smyth, 2001). These learners were chosen from a pool of 15 other applicants. The application process included interviewing 2nd year university students of English, currently enrolled in an introduction to linguistics course. Fifteen students were interviewed and the questions asked concerned the amount of time the students had spent studying English in some form, where they had studied, and what kind

of commitment they could give to this investigation. Following the interview the students were given a picture story, the same story for every applicant, and were told to tell the story in their own words. The researcher recorded and transcribed these story-tellings; the error and error types were counted on the transcripts. The two learners who were chosen made a similar number of errors and error types but more importantly expressed interest or enthusiasm in the study. Pen commented that she was free any time during the week, smiled frequently in the interview, and said she would like to participate. Aum said she was “very excited” to participate, laughed occasionally and smiled in the interview, and was free most days.

The other participant was the tutor who was also the researcher. While the tutor was an experienced teacher of English, this was the first time he had employed the use of sociocultural inspired negotiation in his teaching.

Tasks and Task Rationale

The narratives or stories used in this study were derived from picture stories, from 6 – 9 frames (see Appendix A). The tasks involved the learners using their own words to create narratives from the picture stories with the tutor intervening to negotiate ill-formed verb structures produced by the learners. Learner performance of the narratives as well as learner/tutor negotiations were recorded and transcribed. The negotiated sessions involved the tutor and learner discussing the ill-formed verb errors left on the transcript.

The use of picture stories was chosen as the content carrier for this study as the telling of stories is a meaningful, communicative activity. Bell (2002) asserts that “human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (p. 207).

Egan (cited in Reed & Johnson, 2000, p. 264) claims that imaginative story-telling is an activity that children are naturally good at, suggesting that the story telling process is elemental to human nature. Pavlenko (2002, quoting Hardy) states that “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (p. 213). Yet, oral story telling in the second language classroom, at least at the university level, is often given short shrift. *American Headway 2* (2001), a foundational text used at the learners’ university, has a number of stories scattered throughout the text but only in Chapters 3 and 11 are the learners asked to perform an oral exercise in English to tell a picture story in their own words. Chapter 12 suggests an activity where the learners can bring ghost stories to class and practice telling them, but it seems included as a supplemental activity to do at the end. The learners in this study claimed that they had not done much story-telling before in their university classes, and this was confirmed by the conversation program head who said that story-telling was just a small component of their program; only one story-telling task was undertaken in a term. Given that story telling is often neglected or marginalized in the second or foreign language classroom at the university level, and that it is an important and common communicative activity, it was chosen as an ideal task type for wedding focus on form processes to meaningful, communicative content.

Research Questions, Instruments, and Procedures

The following procedures and instruments were employed to answer research questions 1 and 3 (see introductory chapter, pp.18 - 19). These procedures involved counting well-formed and ill-formed verb structures in story-tellings. The story telling

sessions began with an unrecorded rehearsal. The purpose of the rehearsal was to help the learners manage affective factors, such as nervousness, and to help them orientate to and familiarize themselves with the task. Following the rehearsal, the tutor recorded the learners telling the stories in their own words and later these recordings were transcribed by the tutor/researcher. The structure of these story-telling sessions was the same in all sessions – 3 sessions plus a final delayed session. After each of these sessions, the researcher counted all the contexts where verbs appeared or should have appeared in the transcript. Then the researcher counted the number of well-formed verb structures – this included the right form and consistent use – and reported them in tables in the quantitative results section. Both learners chose, without tutor intervention, to change their present tense verbs to past tense forms on the written transcript from the first story onward, so the researcher reported present tense verbs as ill-formed if they were not noticed and corrected by the learner. (However, the learners were not told to focus on verbs ahead of time). The percentage of verb forms that were correct on oral performances was also reported. To obtain reliability in this study, the researcher counted the verb structures four times.

In addition to counting verb structures on story-tellings, the researcher also counted the corrections learners made to the transcript of these story-tellings. The ill-formed verb structures that were successfully corrected by the learners were reported in tables and a percentage change over the three sessions was also recorded.

The procedures and instruments used to answer research question 2 (see introductory chapter) measuring degree of self-regulation attained were relevant for the three negotiation sessions; each of these sessions took place two days after a story telling

session. Prior to the start of the negotiation sessions, the learners were allowed ten minutes to themselves to correct their own ill-formed verb structures from a transcript of their recorded performances. To rate these self-corrections, the researcher used an instrument for measuring learners's movements towards self-regulation. This is the 5-point scale created by Aljaahfreh and Lantolf's (1994), mentioned in chapter 1 under the overview of terms section.

The learners' self-corrections were counted as a 5 on this scale, as no intervention was needed. After a learner had an opportunity to self-correct, the tutor and the learner examined the transcript together as the tutor attempted to provide scaffolds to help the learner recognize and correct her errors. These negotiation sessions were recorded and transcribed as well. Following each session, the researcher examined the transcript of these sessions and counted the number of errors the learners were able to notice and correct after receiving feedback from the tutor. The percentage of the errors that were noticed and corrected was also reported. These figures are presented in tables in the next chapter under quantitative results.

Additionally, each episode of these sessions was given a rating based on the scale above. However, the guidelines outlined in the scale are fairly broad. For example, what should researchers count as 'minimal'? Should it be one offer of help, or two, or even more? What should be counted as 'obvious' help? Deciding where to draw the line between levels is inevitably somewhat arbitrary as concepts such as 'minimal' or 'obvious' are not binary but on a continuum. What is important then, in establishing criteria for scoring, is to choose the best option among all less than satisfactory options and apply consistency to whatever option is chosen. The researcher decided the best

option available to him would be to view 'minimal' help as one offer or assist and to stick to this consistently in rating the episodes. However, he added a small innovation to the scale by adding a .5 to a learner's score on an episode if it was judged that the amount and/or quality of help fell between 2 levels in the ratings. Therefore, some episodes were rated as 2.5 or 3.5. To obtain reliability, the researcher reviewed all the episodes four times to ensure that the criteria for scored judgments were consistently applied to all episodes and to both learners. The reason the episodes were reviewed four times, rather than two or three, is that a high scorer reliability has traditionally been found when holistic scoring has been performed four times (Hughes, 1989, p.87).

These scored judgments or ratings are provided in three places in the results section. They are recorded in *summary tables* in chapter 4 and in a section referred to as *commentaries*. Additionally, the mean scores of these ratings are figured in the quantitative section in table 10. These tools and procedures will be explained next as they are relevant to answering research question 4 (see introductory chapter) which seeks to investigate all the plausible sociocultural reasons learners progressed, made no progress, or regressed.

To answer question 4, a commentaries section was created which precedes each episode. The commentaries provide a narrative to explain why the particular rating for self-regulation was given. They explore all the sociocultural reasons why the learner progressed or regressed (within sessions) telling a coherent story and building a body of evidence to support plausible conclusions.

Microgenesis and macrogenesis are also important explanatory tools to measure reasons for self-regulation. To review, microgenesis refers to the degree learners make

progress in self-regulation in short or sudden time frames. Macrogenesis refers to growth over longer periods. For our purposes, microgenesis is recorded as moment to moment growth *within* sessions, in noticing and correcting an error in relation to the amount or quality of help that is offered from the tutor. Macrogenesis measures progress in self-regulation in relation to help *across* sessions. Together, these tools provide important pieces of evidence as to why the learner progressed or regressed in self-regulation. The self-regulatory scale offers a broad guideline to measure the amount of help that is offered. But quality of help is also taken into account to measure these features as well. Since 'obvious' help, mentioned in the regulatory scale, is a little too broad a concept to fully capture the dynamics of quality of help we used some features of another scale created by Aljaahfreh and Lantolf to measure this category. This is a 13-point scale (see Appendix D) that in very exquisite detail measures quantity and quality of help according to degrees of explicitness. However, since it was a scale created to measure interactions around learners' written errors it does not always capture very well the types of feedback usually offered in oral interactions so it was not chosen as the main referent here. Nevertheless, the scale is useful in that it breaks some aspects of quality of help into 2 grades of explicitness: the learner is able to recognize the error after reviewing a whole composition, or seeing it in a segment (sentence line, clause, or phrase). To further break this down, the researcher added a third category – the learner is able to notice the error after it is pointed out at the item/two-word phrase level. In addition to this borrowed feature, the tutor/researcher also started out negotiations with an implicit question from this scale – "Is there anything you'd like to change here?" and then attempted to gradually offer more explicit help (through a mix of feedback types - some from the 13

point scale, when appropriate, and some that seemed more apt and naturally occurring kinds of oral feedback, such as vowel elongation). This quality and quantity of help as it relates to self-regulation and microgenesis or macrogenesis is recorded in the commentaries as well as the summary tables which follow the commentaries section. These tables summarize findings from the commentaries.

Other important pieces of sociocultural evidence are noted in the commentaries as well – these include the linguistic, paralinguistic, and salient social and cultural events that occurred between the learners and the tutor. Examples include whether positive face is supported or not, whether negative face is avoided, whether sense of confidence is supported, what kind of suprasegmental features appear – vowel elongation, raised or lowered tones, whether there are signs of shifts in equality or mutuality in role relationships (in this study the tutor and learners began with low equality and mutuality), or whether there is smiling or laughter. Finally, how these features might connect to other cultural issues or affective factors bearing on success or failure was also noted. These features were noted by the tutor/researcher after sessions and jotted down when reviewing and transcribing the audio-recordings.

Finally, a debriefing/post-study session was conducted with the learners to record other sorts of affective or sociocultural factors that bear on the outcome of the study. This interview took place following the final, delayed performance. Four questions were asked of the learners. These are stated below.

Post-Study Interview Questions:

1. How did you feel about the study and/or what kind of feelings did you have while doing it?

2. What did you feel that you learned from participating? Did you think you progressed?
3. Would you like to do it again?
4. Did you study English in some way on the break? What kind?

In summary, both quantitative and qualitative instruments were used to answer the research questions and analyze the data. Quantitative tools were utilized to answer question 1 but quantitative and qualitative tools were used to answer questions 2, 3, and 4 as these tools are not necessarily mutually exclusive methods of analysis. Quantitative tools can be employed in the service of qualitative processes and explanations, to provide further support or evidence. And likewise, quantitative tools sometimes depend on a qualitative framework in order to proceed. "Before we count, we have to decide what categories to count" (Chaudron, 1988, p. 16). The results of both the quantitative product – the percentage of changes that were made - and the qualitative processes – an exploration of the sociocultural reasons the changes were made - are discussed in the next chapter. A graphic review of the research design in this chapter follows on the next page in figure 2.

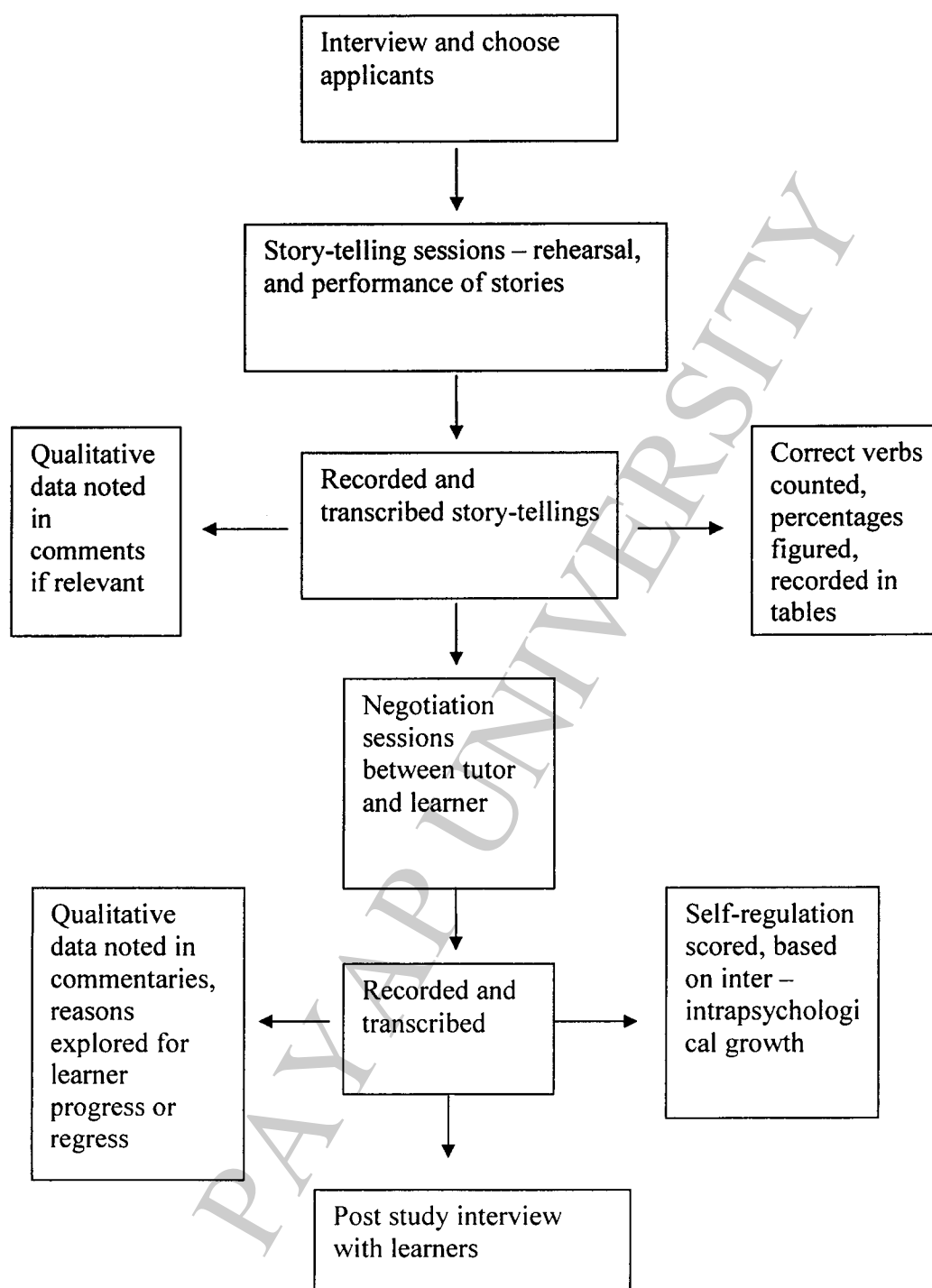


Figure 2. Overview of the Research Design