1 Establishing the framework for the book

This chapter describes the steps that were taken to identify a suitable framework for the book. Section 1.1 describes why a qualitative research approach was selected to examine classroom processes, and why it was decided to conduct the first of the five interlinked studies upon which the book is based as a grounded theory study. Section 1.2 describes the data collection and analysis procedures that are an integral part of grounded theory development, and that must be followed in the prescribed way if a grounded theory is eventually to emerge. Section 1.3 describes the framework that was identified on the completion of the first study. This framework, taken from the discipline of social psychology, enabled a wide range of classroom behaviours to be collected – and their interrelationships explored.

1.1 Selecting the research approach

Which path to follow: qualitative or quantitative?

An important decision faced by any person embarking on any kind of research project is what kind of research approach to adopt. The researcher first needs to decide whether to conduct research that is towards either the qualitative or the quantitative end of the research spectrum: research that aims to describe or explain a particular phenomenon, or research that aims to investigate hypotheses and to present findings in numerical terms. A range of both practical and psychological factors influences the decision of the researcher. Practical considerations include access to suitable locations for the research, availability of willing informants, and time constraints. Psychological factors include the kind of research the investigator considers worthwhile to carry out, and what kind of research the investigator feels comfortable in conducting.

In my case I knew that I was interested in investigating interaction in language classrooms in order to reach a broad understanding of what was occurring. I intuitively felt that qualitative research approaches 'fitted' naturalistic settings such as language classrooms more closely

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than did quantitative approaches. Language classrooms are not experimental laboratories (places where quantitative research of a scientific nature is traditionally conducted), because in classrooms it is impossible to exclude all the variables that may influence the findings. In controlled environments such as laboratories it is much easier to establish cause–effect relationships, since extraneous variables can be identified beforehand – and then either eliminated or acknowledged to have had a possible effect on the findings. This is virtually impossible to achieve in naturalistic settings.

> 'In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manage-able problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern.' Schön (1987: 1)

I considered that I would feel more comfortable if I acknowledged at the outset what my intuition and experience told me: that the widest possible number of variables are interacting with and influencing one another in any language classroom at any point in time. I therefore felt that I should focus on the interrelationships between a wide number of variables – rather than selecting and investigating in detail a narrowly circumscribed aspect of classroom interaction, and ignoring other variables that might be influencing the findings. Metaphorically speaking, I decided that I wished to observe classroom interaction through a wide-angle lens – rather than putting a preselected aspect of classroom interaction under the microscope.

A further reason why I decided to adopt a qualitative approach was that I enjoyed writing and was happy to present my findings descriptively. It was a challenge to try and present the data in sufficient richness and depth to convince the reader of the validity of the findings. In effect I felt more comfortable about presenting my findings descriptively than I did about presenting them in quantitative form. (It is tempting for quantitative researchers who have gathered data from a relatively small sample of subjects to imply that their findings have general application. However, unless the sample is a large-scale statistical one that has been selected randomly – something that it is extremely difficult to achieve in an educational setting – the findings may only be of limited application.)

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A key aspect of qualitative research is that its objective is not to produce findings that are capable of general application, but rather to produce results that 'resonate'. By 'resonate' I mean the ability of the research findings to ring true to those who encounter them. I decided that I felt more comfortable using a research approach that would enable me to present my findings in such a way that readers in other settings might say to themselves, 'Yes, that's right. That's how it is!' I wanted the onus to be on the reader to accept the findings because they made sense to them – rather than on myself to 'prove' that the findings were valid.

Focusing on teacher cognition

Having decided to conduct a qualitative research study, I now needed to decide how best to access the significance that the words and behaviour of both teachers and students in language classrooms have for others. Leaders in the field, such as Breen (1986) and Allwright and Bailey (1991), have highlighted the limitations of observational research, which can only document behaviour that can be directly observed. Such research does not enable the researcher to access the things that are going on inside people's heads – or the interpretations that individual class members put on the words and actions of others.

Teacher cognition research – research into the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching: what teachers know, believe and think – is a burgeoning area in educational research (Borg, 2003). This strand of research is based on the premise that teachers draw on complex, personalised networks of knowledge to make their classroom decisions. I decided that I would use the thoughts, views and impressions of classroom language teachers – not with a view to describing individual teacher belief systems, but as a way of more fully understanding classroom interaction. As outlined in Chapter 11, this approach has its limitations, as does any other research approach. However, I decided that, on balance, interviewing teachers and trying to understand their personal interpretations of classroom events would be a fruitful way of uncovering and more fully understanding the complex pedagogic and social reality of language classrooms.

In sum, at this point I knew that I wished to conduct qualitative research. I also knew that I wished to base my research on interviews with classroom teachers. What I now needed to do was to select from a number of qualitative approaches the one that was most likely to enable me to achieve my research objective: a global understanding of classroom processes.

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Why conduct a grounded theory study?

Recent years have witnessed a growth in interest in qualitative research, with increasing numbers of qualitative studies being conducted – certainly in the field of education. Qualitative studies are still eschewed by some people, who consider that they are less 'do-able' within limited timeframes, and produce findings that are often too lengthy to be reported in conventional-length articles in research journals. The perception also persists in some quarters that qualitative research is somehow 'woolly': less rigorous and less 'scientific' than quantitative research, which takes much of its terminology from the hard sciences. However, the quality of research is not related to the approach that is used: there can be both good and bad research of any kind. Many people about to embark upon research find themselves naturally drawn towards conducting qualitative studies. This is particularly so with researchers with a teaching background, who often wish to conduct research that they believe likely to produce results that can have direct relevance for everyday classroom practice.

It is now increasingly recognised that there are a number of well-established qualitative research traditions, each of which has its own particular merits and its set of core precepts and recommended procedures. Many of the understandings and procedures (such as interviewing techniques) are common across the various traditions, albeit with subtle differences and points of emphasis.

> In his book, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (1998), Creswell provides a useful overview of five well-established traditions of qualitative research: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. Creswell also describes the origins of grounded theory and its somewhat chequered career in terms of the dramatic falling out of Glaser and Strauss, the two sociologists who originally developed and described grounded theory development procedures in 1967.

When I came to embark on the first of the five studies upon which this book is based I decided to conduct a grounded theory study. This decision was partly based on my desire to obtain a holistic view of language classrooms: to try to understand how all the various pieces of the classroom 'jigsaw' fitted together. I was intrigued by the fact that the objective of grounded theory is, as its name suggests, to develop theory that is grounded in the data, and that gradually emerges from the data in an organic way rather than being imposed from outside. I

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decided that I would like to try my hand at theory building. Little did
I realise that, although I was able to develop a localised theory by the
end of the first study, it would take me a further ten years to formulate
a more generalised theory that might be applicable to a wider range of
contexts.

> 'Grounded theory is a highly systematic research approach for the
> collection and analysis of qualitative data for the purpose of devel-
> oping explanatory theory that furthers the understanding of social
> and psychological phenomena. The objective of grounded theory is
> the development of theory that explains basic patterns common in
> social life.'   Chenitz and Swanson (1986: 3)

The other factor that influenced my decision to conduct a grounded
theory study was chance. It so happened that the postgraduate depart-
ment of the faculty of nursing in the university where I worked had a
long tradition of supporting grounded theory research. Postgraduate
seminars, where researchers were introduced to the key precepts of
grounded theory and given opportunities to internalise them within a
supportive environment, were regularly run. I joined one of these
seminar groups in 1993, and from then on became a committed
grounded theory researcher.

Grounded theory is not for everyone, but it has served my purposes
admirably. Interestingly, it is an approach that is favoured by researchers
in the health sciences who wish to conduct studies into practitioner expe-
riences, such as the experience of working in neo-natal wards or the
experience of caring for people with Alzheimer's. The experience of
being a language teacher is in some respects similar to that of being a
health professional: working at the grass roots level, relating to a variety
of individuals under sometimes challenging conditions, routinely having
to make on-the-spot decisions, and so on. It seemed that grounded
theory was a research approach that might lend itself particularly well to
investigating language classrooms.

Comment

Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in qualitative
research approaches. The following factors have influenced this
growing movement:

- the development of increasingly sophisticated, user-friendly
  computer packages designed to facilitate the management of

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qualitative data and enhance the researcher's analytical thinking;
- recognition of the increasingly complex nature of classroom processes, as articulated in Breen's seminal article on the context of language learning (1986);
- a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the limited relevance to classroom practice of findings from narrowly focused classroom-based research;
- a desire to find ways of reducing the oft-lamented gap between theory and practice;
- the general postmodern climate of the times, with its rejection of traditional, positivistic, scientific research traditions in favour of softer, more flexible, interpretive approaches.

1.2 Conducting a grounded theory study

The decision to conduct a grounded theory study should not be taken lightly, since there are no half measures with grounded theory: one is either conducting a grounded theory study, or one is not. If a researcher decides to go down the grounded theory path, they need plenty of time and determination to learn and then follow the procedures necessary for the development of a grounded theory.

A book that outlines grounded theory development procedures in an accessible way is *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). With its user-friendly style, short sections, italicised key terms, bold print for emphasis and so on, this book appears to be the answer to every neophyte researcher's prayers: a manual that describes the steps that should be followed for the successful completion of a grounded theory study. Unfortunately life is not so simple. Although the book provides a readily accessible outline of grounded theory development procedures, thereby filling an invaluable niche, it does not do the researcher's work for them. Many researchers purchase the book and follow the procedures without developing full ownership of the process. When this happens they may be disappointed with the result: grounded theories do not always emerge. Another criticism levelled at this book is that it oversimplifies grounded theory development procedures. Nevertheless, it is an excellent starting point.

Establishing the framework for the book

Conducting a successful grounded theory study involves understanding the principles that underpin the procedures. This process is a challenging one, since it involves rejecting certain assumptions about the nature of research and replacing them with others. It also involves forcing oneself to follow certain procedures – and ensuring that one does not cut corners when the going gets hard. Conducting a grounded theory study involves going down certain blind alleys and having to retrace one's steps when certain hypotheses prove incorrect. The process of developing a grounded theory is also highly engaging, particularly in the creative phase when it is necessary to reach a higher level of abstraction by creating superordinate categories, often through the invention of new words. The process sometimes becomes compulsive, with researchers taking their notebooks everywhere they go and sitting in corners scribbling furiously when potentially important thoughts suddenly flash through their minds. In the latter stages of the cycle, when the theory finally starts to emerge, the process is truly exciting.

In sum, grounded theory research is a highly rewarding endeavour for those who persevere with it. It need not take the form of a large-scale study, but can be used for studies of more modest dimensions. These can include studies that stop short of developing theory, having as their goal the development of conceptual frameworks. When embarking on a grounded theory study it is helpful to join a support group of like-minded researchers who are able to share experiences and insights, to keep one on the right path, and to offer critical input into one's work.

The following sections provide a brief outline of the procedures that led first to the identification of the phenomenon of class cohesiveness, and second to the selection of an appropriate framework for the book. These procedures are an integral part of the research process: only by following them can the researcher be certain that the framework that is eventually chosen fits the data as closely as possible.

Grounded theory interviews

Armed with a broadly framed research question (in my case, 'What is a good language class?'), the grounded theorist embarks on a series of focused, open-ended interviews. The purpose of these wide-ranging interviews is to open up the topic, by encouraging each informant to talk openly and honestly about their classroom experiences. While ensuring that the interview does not veer too far off track, the researcher must give each informant sufficient leeway to talk about whatever they appear most ready and able to articulate. It is often the case that one teacher has valuable insights into one particular aspect of being a language teacher, while another teacher has equally valuable insights into another aspect.

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Conducting a grounded theory study

The insights provided by each teacher generate additional questions in the researcher's mind: questions that the next teacher can be invited to answer. This kind of questioning, which grounded theorists call 'theoretical sampling', enables the researcher to identify and explore the significance of additional phenomena that they may not have considered important prior to conducting the study. These phenomena may be central to an understanding of the totality of the experience. By asking subsequent teachers to elaborate on insights and observations provided by previous teachers, a composite picture of what all the teachers are collectively saying is gradually developed. The validity of the findings is also enhanced, since the researcher can check whether the insights provided by one teacher are unique, or shared by others.

Since the data provided through open-ended interviews form the basis for grounded theory development, it is essential that grounded theorists are rigorous in their questioning techniques. They must ensure that they ask open rather than leading questions, and constantly invite informants to expand on each point they make, by elaborating on specific circumstances, or by providing examples to illustrate what they mean. They must be prepared to accommodate repetition and redundancy and resist the temptation to cut informants off in mid-flow. They must also provide on-the-spot validity checks, by repeating back to each informant what they have said during the course of the interview, and ensuring that they have understood them correctly. Using a questioning tone of voice is a useful strategy for encouraging informants to elaborate further. Additional validity-enhancing question types can be used, including devil's advocate questions (presenting an opposite position or interpretation and inviting comment) and hypothetical 'what if?' questions.

It is essential to tape-record and transcribe all interviews in full. This is because the researcher cannot know until a much later stage in the research process the significance of many of the observations that teachers are making – let alone know where they fit in the overall jigsaw puzzle picture. Unless verbatim transcripts are made, many potentially significant pieces of information may be lost.

Most research traditions advocate a compartmentalised approach to data collection and analysis: collecting all the data and then, when the data collection is complete, commencing the analysis. Grounded theory development requires a different approach. The researcher must alternate between data collection and analysis in an ongoing way: the second interview is conducted only after the first one has been analysed, the third only after the second has been analysed, and so on.

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Data analysis

Grounded theorists work through a series of coding procedures that open their minds to the many possible ways in which their data can be interpreted. It is essential that they do not develop a fixed view about what their data are indicating early on in the research process: to do so closes their minds to alternative interpretations that may eventually prove to be more valid. Grounded theorists first print out their transcripts and then follow a series of coding procedures known as 'open coding' (initial opening up of the data), 'axial coding' (putting the data together in new ways) and 'selective coding' (systematically relating categories to the emerging central phenomenon).

The first stage of the analysis involves making notations all over the transcripts. This process includes highlighting words that stand out from the surrounding text, jotting down words that are similar to or associated with those that appear in the text, drawing arrows indicating possible connections, and hypothesising about the possible causes, conditions and consequences of a range of reported classroom behaviours. While making notes on their transcripts, grounded theorists record their first tentative ideas about what the data may be indicating in memos, each one headed and dated, and written on a separate piece of paper – or coded appropriately on the computer for later sorting.

A key feature of grounded theory development is that it requires the researcher to think both deductively and inductively. Although analytical thinking is an integral part of the research process, speculative thinking is equally important – not as an end in itself, but as an interim step in the research process. There are three main ways in which grounded theorists can use their imagination as a research tool: through diagramming; through exploring the data through metaphors; and through creating new words for overarching categories under which lesser categories can be subsumed. These are considered in turn below.

Diagramming

When grounded theorists are in the final stages of their research they often look back at their first tentative attempts to represent schematically relationships between their data and are reminded of how naive their thinking then was. They forget how far they have progressed since those first tentative scrawls and scribbles. A requirement for each diagram is that it represents the researcher's current overall understanding of the data – and is a refinement of the previous one. An early diagram of the relationship between individuals in language classes looked like this:
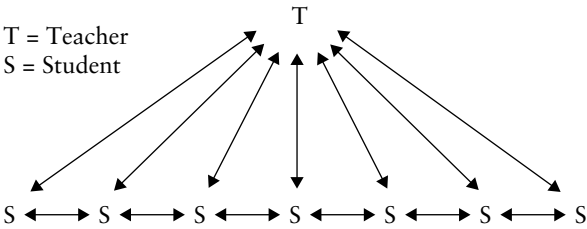
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Figure 1.1   Early diagram

In contrast, a later diagram looked like this:
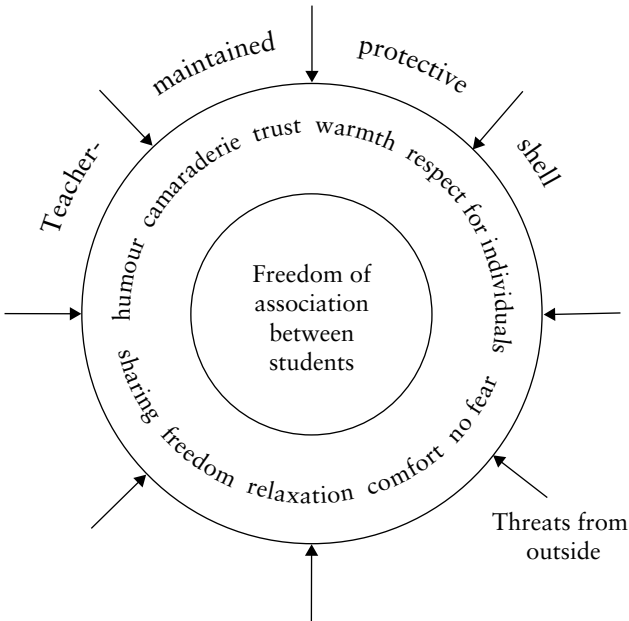

Figure 1.2   Later diagram

In the meantime I had explored the data with a variety of additional diagrams. Many of these were in the form of circles: circles interlinked as chains, small circles clustered around a central circle, overlapping circles, individual circles contained within one big circle, and circles nested inside one another like Russian dolls. The early diagrams had questions or problems attached to them. For example, with the links-of-a-chain diagram (which represented the hypothesis that a good language class might be defined as a series of good lessons), I broke the chain and

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