CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Before discussing the research design and procedures adopted in the present study, it is important to define the word ‘research.’ Kerlinger (cited in Cohen and Manion, 1980) defines research as “the systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomena (p.4).” Chadwick et al. (as cited in Blaikie, 2000, p.41) have classified research designs according to five criteria:

- Method of data collection;
- Primary objectives (e.g. description, hypothesis testing, evaluation, social impact assessment);
- Time orientation (cross-sectional, longitudinal, retrospective);
- Whether the data are to be collected to answer a specific research question (primary and secondary); and
- The degree to which the methods impinge on the respondents (obtrusive and unobtrusive).

Furthermore, a research design, according to Blaikie (2000, p.42), needs to answer three basic questions.

- What will be studied?
- Why will it be studied?
- How will it be studied?

Since second language acquisition is a relatively new discipline, most of its research methods have their origins in research methods from other disciplines, notably linguistics, child language acquisition, sociology, and psychology (Gass & Selinker, 1994). Various procedures and methods are normally
employed to obtain data pertaining to second/foreign language learning and teaching. In general, research methodology used in second/foreign language learning includes experiments, surveys, case studies, field studies and so on. Other techniques can also be used in data collection such as observation, testing, interview or instrumentation. Additionally, such data can be collected cross-sectionally or longitudinally depending on the nature of the research to be conducted (Hatch and Lazaraton, 1991; Gas and Selinker, 1994). In order to decide on the choice of procedures for the present study we need to examine the goals, aims and objectives of the present study in detail.

3.1.1 The present study

As mentioned in the introduction to this study the focus will be on the writing skills of the Yemeni Arabic-speaking learners of English majoring in English at the English department, Faculty of Education, Taiz University. It is hoped that this study will be able to provide some insights into the nature of the problems and difficulties facing these learners when they compose in English. This study will also attempt to provide some fundamental clues about the strategies utilized by these learners when initiating a composition in English.

The objectives of this study can be summarized in the following three sections:

1) To assess the competence of the learners of English at different levels of the undergraduate program at Taiz University by means of (a) Language Ability Test (LAT) and (b) Composition writing.
2) To conduct a needs analysis to find out about the writing-related needs of these learners and how effective the English program is in meeting the requirements of these learners. The learners' competence will also serve the purpose of specifying the linguistically problematic areas that these learners at different levels of the program need to work on.
3) To review and assess the teaching materials and methods prescribed for teaching English at different levels of the program-L1, L2, L3 and L4,
and to examine the materials and methods specifically meant to serve the need of developing the writing skills of these levels.

Keeping in mind those objectives, we can formulate the research questions for this study in the following manner:

1) Is there a correlation between learners' linguistic competence and the structure of the current ELT program at TU?
2) Does the weightage given to the various components of the program contribute to improving learners' competence in English?
3) Is there a correlation between learners' needs and expectations from the program and the present ELT at TU?
4) Is there a progression in terms of the students' linguistic competence and writing ability from L1 to L4 of the undergraduate program?
5) How effective are the R&C materials in addressing learners' writing problems and difficulties and bringing about the requisite progression from L1 to L4?
6) What is the nature of the problems and difficulties that Arab learners face when writing or composing in English?
7) Does any component of the EFL program sufficiently address the problems of learners' writing skills?

3.2 Procedures for the present study

The data of the present study was collected by means of objective as well as subjective approaches. Error analysis, for instance, is primarily objective as the data is subjected to some preliminary analysis and then presented by means of statistical devices. Further, Error Analysis can also be subjective in order to explain the process of learning through errors. Thus this study is partly objective and partly subjective. To illustrate, the errors produced by the learners in the written test as well as in the proficiency test would be tabulated and then presented by means of statistical devices.
Data pertaining to Needs Analysis can be processed by means of some objective as well as subjective methods. To be more specific, the data would be presented by means of statistical measures in order to show, for instance, the frequency of occurrence of the questionnaire items. In addition, the data obtained from the teachers’ questionnaires would be statistically as well as subjectively presented.

As far as the review and assessment of the teaching materials and methods currently in use is concerned, the data obtained from the review of the teaching materials and methods would be primarily subjectively presented. A closer look at the syllabi, along with the course description, currently in use in the department concerned would also provide some insights as to how much emphasis the program gives to the teaching of writing skills at different levels of the undergraduate program.

The data of the present study data was collected through the cross-sectional method by randomly choosing 20 students in every group, 10 males and 10 females. The selected subjects belong to the same institution, Taiz University, and are, roughly speaking, educationally, linguistically and socio-economically uniform. The use of the cross-sectional method, however, does not necessarily imply that the longitudinal method is not a useful method, but it is just that the cross-sectional method serves the immediate purposes of this study. And since the longitudinal method is rather time-consuming, the researcher, as a teacher in the English department in question, can use it at some point in the future to trace the linguistic development of one or two students over a period of time that may extend to four years. In addition, interviews and informal discussions with the teachers as well as students have also been capitalized on to gain some insights into the process of teaching writing skills to those learners.

The subjects of this study are 80 native speakers of Yemeni Arabic majoring in English at the faculty of Education, Taiz University. These learners receive English instruction at the university level for four years so as to be
linguistically prepared to teach English in the Yemeni schools, where they are desperately needed especially in the rural areas. Prior to their joining the English departments across the country, these learners receive about six years of English instruction in preparatory and secondary school. Before students get admitted into the English departments, they are required to take an entrance exam prepared and administered by the teachers of the department. It is usually the case that about 150 students are admitted into the department every year based on their entrance exam scores.

It should be pointed out that the learners enrolling in the English departments are high-school leavers, and they join such departments with very little competence in English. Generally their performance in the four language skills is rather poor and this reflects the kind of English instruction they receive in the Yemeni schools prior to their joining the English departments. Producing learners, who are neither linguistically nor communicatively competent in English, seems to leave teachers with no other option but to teach learners the very basics of the language that should have been taken care of in the pre-university stages of English education.

3.2.1 Elicitation procedures.

3.2.1.1 Language Ability Test (LAT)

LAT is meant to examine the subjects’ linguistic competence in the target language and also aims at testing certain grammatical structures proved to be problematic for Arab learners of English. Thus, the subjects of the study were given a seven-part test and were given one complete hour to do it. Questions 1-6 of LAT are multiple choice questions so that they could be objectively evaluated. The objectively assessed part of the test included questions relating to English tenses, article system, prepositions, vocabulary, linking words, and paraphrasing. There is however one question (no. 7), which is more or less subjectively evaluated. It required the subjects to translate ten Arabic sentences into English.
Question one of LAT which is meant to test learners’ familiarity with the English tenses includes ten incomplete sentences and there is one correct answer and two other distracters. Learners are thus required to circle the correct words that best complete these sentences, and this question is marked out of ten points. Question two is meant to test their ability in using the English article system. They were given five statements with blanks to be filled out using (a, an, the or nothing), and this question is awarded eight points. Question three, which deals with English prepositions, includes five incomplete statements that learners need to fill out by using appropriate prepositions. This question is graded out of five points. Question four of LAT is a vocabulary test and includes five incomplete sentences and learners are to choose the right word from the three choices given to complete those sentences. Question five of LAT includes five incomplete statements and learners are required to choose the correct word from the three choices given to fill out blanks. Question six, the paraphrasing question, requires learners to rewrite sentences using the words provided in brackets and learners are clearly instructed not to change the original meaning of those sentences. It includes ten statements and was awarded ten marks, one mark each. Question seven, translation question, requires learners to translate ten sentences from Arabic into English and was graded out of twenty marks. LAT took place under normal examination conditions, and dictionary use was not allowed to ensure validity of the test results.

3.2.1.2 Composition Writing

To elicit written data from the learners, they were asked to write a free composition on a given topic (The happiest day in my life). This particular topic was chosen on purpose to encourage learners to write more freely and to help reduce the psychological fear that they presumably have from writing in English. The eighty students representing the four levels of the undergraduate program performed the task in their classrooms and were asked not to exceed 500 words. This task was to be completed in 45 minutes and dictionary use was
not allowed to ensure validity of the test results. The errors detected in the writings of the learners of the various groups were marked, tabulated and statistically presented and analyzed so as to have a deeper understanding about the problems and difficulties these learners face when composing in English, and also to be able to hypothesize about the process of learning to compose in English.

3.2.1.3 Learners’ Questionnaire

It is now widely accepted that learners need to be directly involved in the planning of their own learning. In fact, learners’ needs and interests should be the cornerstone of any ESL/EFL program. To collect data pertaining to the writing-related needs of the Yemeni students majoring in English at Taiz University, a five-point questionnaire including 15 items was designed to obtain such data. The questionnaire consists of four sections. Section one is devoted to collecting some personal information about the learners such as their level, age, sex and how many years they have spent learning English. Data pertaining to learners’ attitudes towards writing in English, usefulness of the English program, strategies employed by learners when composing in English were gathered through the other three sections. Items 1-3 are related to students’ attitudes towards writing in English and items 4-8 to the usefulness and appropriateness of the English program currently in use at the English department of Taiz University. Items 9-13 are meant to obtain data regarding the strategies the learners employ when composing in English. The last two items 14 and 15 are related to dictionary use.

The questionnaire was conducted in the presence of the researcher so as to clarify things that were unclear to the participants. It basically contained fifteen items and the participants were provided with five choices ranging from (‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’), and all they had to do was to circle one and only one of those options. On the other hand, items pertaining to learners’ strategies when composing in English required a different set of
options beginning with ‘always true’ and ending with ‘never true.’ Designing it in such a way would ensure that the subjects would be able to do it in a relatively short period of time. Students were therefore instructed to carefully read the statements and then circle the appropriate choice, and were given fifteen minutes to do this questionnaire in the classroom.

3.2.1.4 Teachers’ Questionnaire

Another five-point questionnaire, which included 14 items, was designed to collect data from the teachers of the English department at Taiz University. Items 1-3 of the questionnaire sought to gather data regarding the English program in general. Items 4-7 were used to obtain data pertaining to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the teaching materials and methods currently in use in teaching writing skills. Additionally, items 8-11 were meant to obtain information regarding the attitudes of the learners towards writing or composing in English. The last three items, 12-14, touched on certain external factors such as the use of audio-visual aids, over-crowdedness of classrooms, etc. As already indicated the questionnaire has 14 items, each of which includes five options ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ and the teachers were requested to read through the statements and to circle the appropriate options. As many as ten questionnaires were distributed to the English teachers of the department in question and it took them a few days to do it.

3.2.1.5 Review and assessment of the teaching materials and methods

In order to find out about the efficiency and appropriateness of the teaching materials and methods currently in use in teaching writing skills to these learners, a review and assessment of these materials was also conducted. The discussions the researcher had with the teachers as well as the students pertaining to the techniques and methods used for teaching writing in the English department are also included and made use of in the treatment of the
We also got a closer look into the English program and its various components; besides, the course description used in the English department of the Faculty of Education also proved useful in providing some useful data regarding the prescribed courses and how much emphasis is placed on the teaching of writing skills to the learners in question. The courses offered to these learners can be classified into four classes as follows:

- Language courses
- Linguistics courses
- Literature courses
- University and Faculty requirement courses

3.2.2 Analytical Procedures:

3.2.2.1 Language Ability Test (LAT)

As already indicated LAT is basically aimed at examining the subjects' knowledge of the English grammar and also their ability to come up with grammatically comprehensible utterances. The test is made up of questions (1-6), which are objectively evaluated and question (7), which is, on the other hand, subjectively evaluated. Since we have these two types of questions, we decided to grade them separately so as to increase the validity of the test. In other words, the subjectivity of the translation part should not in any way influence the other parts, which are objectively assessed. The other reason for keeping these two kinds of questions separate is to give us an assessment of the acquisition of the grammatical rules and how these rules are applied to generate grammatically correct sentences via the translation test. We, nevertheless, looked at the combined results of the two parts of the test to have a more comprehensive image of the overall linguistic competence of the learners. The test sections were marked and tabulated by the researcher. The test sections and scores are shown below:
• Tense questions = 1x10 = 10
• Articles = 1x8 = 8
• Prepositions = 1x5 = 5
• Vocabulary = 1x5 = 5
• Linking words = 1x5 = 5
• Paraphrasing = 1x10 = 10
• Translation (subjective) = 20

Total = 63

Additionally, tables and charts are also prepared to show the performance of the four groups in LAT so as to be able to make comparisons across levels. To facilitate this, the tabulations provided in these charts such as the average score of the various parts of the test for every group and also the total score of each of the four groups was given in percentages. These charts clearly show where the weaknesses and strengths of these learners lie and which parts of the test are most problematic for them.

3.2.2.2 Composition Writing

Having gathered the written data produced by the learners, now this data needs to be sorted out so as to look into the nature of the written problems facing these learners. The analysis of the data went through two major stages: error identification and error classification. To do this, the errors made by the learners have been classified into five categories: syntactic, lexical, morphosyntactic, miscellaneous and spelling categories. The spelling category is treated separately from the other four linguistic categories. So after identifying the errors, they would be tabulated and presented in tables and figures so that it would be easy to horizontally count the number of errors made by each of the four groups. Comparisons between the four levels can also be made using these tabulations and statistics. Additionally, the total number of words and total number of sentences produced by the subjects would also be provided so as to obtain some useful clues regarding the writing skills of the learners in question.
It should be indicated here that the data was presented both in numbers as well as in percentages, though the percentages are not actually identical with the actual number of errors or deviant forms produced by the learners as the errors are made not just at the word level but also at the phrase, and sentence levels. The percentages pertaining to lexical and spelling errors were calculated by dividing the total number of errors of each of these categories by the total number of words produced by the learners. On the other hand, the percentages pertaining to syntactic, miscellaneous and morphosyntactic errors were calculated by dividing the number of errors of each of these categories by the total number of sentences produced by the learners. Tables and figures were also prepared to be able to compare the performance of the various groups in composition writing.

3.2.2.3 Learners’ questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather data regarding the writing-related needs of the learners in question. The 15 items of the questionnaire have been subjected to some statistical analysis to find out about, for example, the frequency of occurrence of each item, mean of the scores, the standard deviation and so on. The interest was to know how many students opted for each of the questionnaire 15 items. This has facilitated our task in calculating the percentage of each choice in an item. The data obtained from this questionnaire would be presented in numbers as well as in percentages, and on the basis of this data comparisons between the various groups can be made. Moreover, this data would also be subjectively outlined so as to obtain more clues about the effectiveness of the English program and how much emphasis it places on writing instruction. Such treatment of the data would also help provide some insights regarding how the learners view writing in English and whether they are satisfied with the current program or not. It should also be pointed out that accessibility to the SPSS program helped immensely in processing the collected data. With its inbuilt capacities and features, it was
possible to create cross-tabulations, tables and figures so as to ensure a clear presentation of the data.

3.2.2.4 Teachers' Questionnaire

As mentioned above the data obtained from this questionnaire would be presented both objectively and subjectively. The answers to each item and choice would be tallied and consequently presented using statistical devices. Accessibility to the SPSS program facilitated the statistical presentation of this data. The infinite capacities of SPSS helped present the data statistically in terms of frequencies, mean of scores, standard deviations and so on. Tables and pie charts are being used to clearly and smoothly present the data. The overall analysis of the questionnaire would help glean some useful data pertaining to the usefulness and appropriateness of the teaching materials and methods used for teaching writing skills to these learners. The analysis would also provide some useful hints about the efficiency of the program in general and how effective it is in meeting the writing needs of the learners we are dealing with.

3.2.2.5 Review and assessment of the teaching materials and methods

The syllabi and the teaching materials and methods currently in use in the English department of TU were reviewed and assessed. The weightage given to the various components of the EFL program was also examined. Not only this, the teaching materials and methods used for teaching R&C courses in level one and level two of the undergraduate program were also examined to see how appropriate these materials and methods are for promoting learners’ writing skills. Further, Language oriented courses, Linguistics and Literature courses, which are content oriented courses, were also looked into to find out how much they contribute to improving learners’ competence in the language and to their ability to write properly in English.

The present thesis divides into five chapters. Chapter one is meant to give a general idea about the ELT scenario in Yemen. Chapter two is essentially
devoted to the review of the related literature with a special focus on the studies that have dealt with the linguistic and rhetorical problems and difficulties that face Arab learners when composing in English. Chapter three is concerned with the research design and procedures that are used to accomplish the aims and objectives of this study, dealing with issues such as data collection procedures, analytical procedures and other relevant issues. Chapter four, on the other hand, deals with the data analysis and results obtained from the three main components of this study: Assessment of the learners’ competence, Needs Analysis, and Review and Assessment of the teaching materials and methods in use in the English department of the Faculty of Education at Taiz University, Yemen. Finally, the fifth chapter would be devoted to giving a brief summary of the study and would also provide some suggestions and recommendations that would certainly help make a difference in the teaching of English writing skills to the speakers of Arabic.