

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses a set of methodology, which covers the research purpose, research questions, data collection techniques, data descriptions, sampling method, and data analysis. Each of them will be explained thoroughly in the sections below.

The purpose of this study, as has previously been mentioned in Chapter One, is to determine the realisation of genre in suicide notes through the means of move-structure analysis. In addition to this, this thesis also aims to see what communicative functions that are shared among the notes that are divided into different categories: by gender and by the time period of the writing.

3.1 Research Design

In order that the generic communicative structure of suicide notes may be investigated, this thesis mainly uses qualitative approach with the help of a simple descriptive quantitative approach in analyzing the data, which are a corpus of suicide notes.

Qualitative approach was used by the researcher with the aim of capturing the essence of the chosen data in a systemic way so that an overview of the context may be obtained; this is in accordance with the Miles and Huberman's (1994) take on qualitative approach, which includes a prolonged or intense contact with data to capture and isolate the preconceptions about the discussed topics through a process of deep attentiveness. Out of the three approaches to qualitative studies that are mentioned by Miles and Huberman (1994), the researcher believed that *interpretativism* was the best approach to employ on this study due to the nature of the data—a corpus of suicide notes—as this approach focuses on seeing the data as a collection of symbols with layers of meaning to be decoded and interpreted by researchers. This is in accordance to genre analysis in ESP focus, as

the aim is to find a generic set of communicative functions in a certain situation within a certain discourse community.

A descriptive quantitative approach, which seeks to describe and give systematic information by calculation about a number of carefully selected data, was also used in this study on the grounds that the researcher examined a number of suicide notes. This approach allowed the researcher to obtain a more accurate description of the moves and steps present in the suicide notes. It also allowed the researcher to clearly determine the obligatory and optional moves and steps in the suicide notes based on the number and the percentage of occurrence—this way, error in determining the generic structure may be minimized.

3.2 Data Collection Technique

In this study, the researcher employed two data collection techniques which are the building of the corpora and choosing the samples by applying Random Stratified Proportional Sampling technique. Each of the technique is explained below.

3.2.1 The Data

The data that are used in this study consist of two different corpora, which were later combined by the researcher. A corpus, defined by Merriam-Webster as “all the writings or works of a particular kind or on a particular subject” (Corpus, n.d.), is commonly used as a basis for the descriptive analysis of a language. In relation to the present study, having a corpus of suicide notes will allow the researcher more freedom in choosing samples and explore patterns of communicative functions in suicide notes.

Overall, this type of analysis allows researchers to identify and analyze “complex ‘association patterns’: the systematic ways in which linguistic features are used in association with other linguistic and non-linguistic features” (Biber, et al., 1998, p. 5). Through the use of corpora, the researcher may show that language is used in such strong and systematic patterns which may constitute as a genre.

Table 3.1 Size and Variety of Corpus

Corpus	Total Texts	Total Words	Longest Text (words)	Shortest Text (words)
Google search engine	27	3,671	866	19
Tumblr	3	1,732	967	228
Bloomsbury	51	9,609	658	13
Dr. Jie Zhang	265	57,389	1,303	6

The first group of data used in this study is comprised of a total of 81 notes. They are suicide notes that the researcher personally collected from various sources such as the Internet search engine, Google; a micro-blogging site, Tumblr; and Bloomsbury website, which has a section dedicated to the collection of suicide texts for the purpose of forensic linguistic studies. The researcher intentionally collected her data from these sources to ensure that the notes she used for this study are on public records. The researcher obtained the second corpus—consisting of a total of 265 notes—through a personal communication with Dr. Jie Zhang, a Chinese sociologist whose studies focus on the prevention of suicides, on the international forum American Association of Suicidology. Dr. Zhang agreed to give the researcher permission to use his corpus for the purpose of this analysis. With this addition, the researcher had a total number of 346 notes (see Table 3.1. for details) with the longest text having 1,303 words and the shortest having 6 words.

3.2.2 Random Stratified Proportional Sampling

To ensure the validity of the sample, the researcher decided to use stratified sampling method rather than taking random sample from the population of the suicide notes collected. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) state that stratified sampling is a method in which the data population is divided into homogenous group with similar characteristics (i.e. based on gender, age, location, etc.) before several subjects are selected randomly from the group as samples. This method is said to be a “useful blend of randomization and categorization” (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 154) and that it is applicable to both quantitative and qualitative study. As the corpus of suicide notes used for this study are comprised of notes written by female and male, and they were written in large time span (the oldest note was

written in 1970 and the newest was written in 2016), the researcher deemed that using this method of sampling would provide a better and more representative result in the study.

The first step of the categorization was selecting the notes that were not translated to English from other languages; out of 346, the researcher had to omit fourteen notes that were originally written in languages other than English. Next, she classified the notes into two large groups based on the gender of the writers: male and female. This gender classification was chosen for two reasons: (1) previous studies (Samraj & Gawron, 2015; Abaalkhail, 2015) did not include gender as a variable in studying the genre of suicide notes, and (2) the researcher assumed that gender might play a role in one's use of language. During this stage of categorization, the researcher had to omit 116 notes as she could not clearly identify whether the writers of said notes were female or male since these notes did not include names or other clues that might help the researcher to confidently classify them into either of the two groups; therefore, only 216 notes out of the original 346 are used with 123 notes written by male and 93 by female.

Table 3.2 Result of Stratified Sampling Method

Gender	Year Written	Total
Female	Prior to year 1990	59
Male	Prior to year 1990	88
Female	Year 1990 and after	34
Male	Year 1990 and after	35
		216

As has been mentioned above, the data consist of suicide notes written on the time-span of forty-six years (between 1970-2016). This, and the fact that previous studies of suicide notes often only used older corpora that did not include notes written after the year 1990, prompted the researcher to do a second classification process: dividing the notes based on the time period they were written—prior to year 1990 and year 1990 and after. Another reason for the researcher's choosing this category as a variable was that the researcher wanted to examine whether time period would play a role in one's use of language as a last resource of

communication. The total number of notes written prior to year 1990 was 147 and 69 for notes written in year 1990 and after (see Table 3.2 for details).

Table 3.3 Result of Proportional Random Sampling

Gender	Year Written	Total Words	Longest Text (words)	Shortest Text (words)	Total Samples (20% out of 216)
Female	Prior to 1990	2,368	662	6	12
Male	Prior to 1990	3,046	486	10	18
Female	After 1990	1,707	537	132	7
Male	After 1990	2,474	866	105	7
		8,958	2,551	253	44

Having classified the notes into groups based on gender and time written, the researcher then took samples randomly from each group as representatives of their respective categories. The researcher used an online random integer generator from the website *Random.ORG* to take twenty percent samples from each category, resulting in the total of 44 notes with the following details: seven notes each from female and male who wrote their notes in year 1990 and after; twelve from female group written prior to 1990; and eighteen notes from male group written prior to 1990.

3.3 Framework for Analysis

After the collection of the data and the selection of the samples using random stratified proportional sampling method, the sample texts were analyzed using ESP genre analysis approach which was originally proposed by Swales (1990) to examine the genre of academic texts. However, since suicide notes are not an academic text, the researcher could not apply Swales' CARS model to find the notes' generic structure. Thus, the researcher employed the more developed genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993), which was the rhetorical move analysis (also used by Abaalkhail, 2015; Ondimu, 2014; Upton & Cohen, 2009). The rhetorical move analysis examines the meaningful segments (moves) of a text (Abaalkhail, 2015; Connor, 2000; Nguyen & Miller, 2012) as well as the communicative purposes so that the structure of each text may be revealed.

The identification of a move in a text begins with the researcher's setting up a boundary for each move, which is done by first determining what communicative purpose a move achieves in a text as well as what the content of the move is (e.g. Bhatia, 1993; Paltridge, 1994). According to Connor and Mauranen (1999), this identification includes linguistic clues such as connectors, marked themes, changes in modality and tense, etc. Previous studies (e.g. Olson, 2005) has pointed out that unlike academic texts, suicide notes do not generally have a wide range of linguistic clues. Moreover, different from academic texts, suicide notes also tend to have an unstructured form. Another characteristic of suicide notes that is noticed by both previous researchers (Roubidoux, 2012, Shapero, 2011, Abaalkhail, 2015, Nashef, 2010) and the present writer is that suicide notes often contain grammatical errors such as capitalization, spelling, and punctuation errors; therefore it is sometimes difficult to determine the beginning and end of a sentence. This study follows Abaalkhail's (2015) method of realizing move "by first identifying the function of each move in the text and describing the steps within the moves, then move to investigate the typical linguistic realizations of the moves in suicide notes."

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was conducted over the course of the study. On-going data analysis and interpretation was done based on the data from the document analysis, which are suicide notes. The steps of the analysis are explained below.

As is common in a structure analysis, the first step was reading the texts extensively multiple times in order to make a preliminary list of functional units (Samraj & Gawron, 2015, Tardy & Swales, 2014). Next, the units that show a certain function was considered a single move; some moves include smaller units, called steps, that serve as the building elements of a move as they also help realizing the same communicative purposes. The next step involves calculating the number or percentage of occurrence in the moves; this allows for the identification of *obligatory* and *optional moves* (Swales, 1990). The researcher

followed Roubidoux (2012), Samraj and Gawron (2015), and Abaalkhail (2015) in calculating the number of occurrence in the moves, which was by dividing the number of occurrences of a move by the number of the notes in each category (see sub-section 3.3.2). The result was later multiplied by a hundred to get the percentage of the move occurrence.

The percentage of occurrence of a move determines whether the move is considered as *obligatory* (appearing in 100% of the text), *quasi-obligatory* (appearing in more than 50% of the analyzed texts) or *optional* (appearing in less than half of the examined texts) (Joseph, et al., 2014). Relying on the percentage of move occurrence to decide the three aforementioned moves are commonly used by researchers (e.g. Parodi, 2014; Upton, 2002; Abaalkhail, 2015; Samraj & Gawron, 2015; Lim, 2010; Joseph et al., 2014) in ESP genre analysis. Through this, a model move structure was devised and patterns of occurrence such as *cycle*—reoccurrence of a move for a second time in one text—and *flexibility*—the order in which the moves occur. (Pho, 2008; Bhatia, 1993, as cited in Abaalkhail, 2015) were determined. The model of structure of each category was then compared and combined to see the generic structure that worked with all four categories.

The researcher coded the texts within one category with the following abbreviations: *M* refers to notes written by male, and *F* refers to the ones written by female. The code *P1990* and *A1990* refer to the time period categories—the former was for notes written prior to year 1990, and the latter to those written in year 1990 and after. The researcher also included another code, for example *#3* to refer to the third note in the category. Below in Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 are examples of four fully coded texts, one from each category. The communicative figures are written on the left, italicized and bolded; and the code is written at the end of each example.

Addressing recipient: (name)	<i>All my family,</i>
Apologizing: (saying sorry)	<i>I am very sorry that I have to do this,</i>
Providing explanations: (justifying)	<i>but my mind is troubled and I am only going to make things worse for you all by living.</i>
Expressing feelings: (expressing love)	<i>I love you all.</i>
(expressing regret)	<i>I am very sorry to leave [name],</i>
Providing explanations: (justifying)	<i>but I am not going to bring worry to [name].</i>
Giving directions: (asking to take care of someone)	<i>Please look after him for me.</i>
Expressing feelings: (expressing + feelings)	<i>He has been a wonderful brother to me. You all have been good to me</i>
Providing explanations: (taking responsibility)	<i>and it is know ones fault only mine.</i>
Expressing feelings: (expressing personal wish)	<i>I hope God will forgive me.</i>
(expressing good wishes)	<i>God bless you all.</i>
Signing off: (name)	<i>Mum XXXX</i>

#10, F, B1990, Appendix 3

Figure 3.1 A fully coded text of female suicide note written before 1990

Addressing recipient: (name)	<i>[name],</i>
Giving directions: (giving belongings)	<i>Keep this place. It's good for all of you.</i>
Expressing feelings: (expressing love)	<i>I love and the kids.</i>
Giving directions: (asking to do sth)	<i>Please make sure they know I love you a them.</i>

#33, M, B1990, Appendix 4

Figure 3.2 A fully coded text of male suicide note written before 1990

Addressing recipient: (endearment & name)	<i>Dear mum</i>
Commentary on letter; Expressing feelings: (expressing goodbye and thanks)	<i>I am writing this letter to say goodbye and thank you for giving me life</i>
Giving directions: (asking to do sth)	<i>and don't cry I don't want you to be sad I want you to remember the fun times and the happy times.</i>
(giving direction abt funeral)	<i>At my funeral make everyone were bright coulors to remember my personality</i>
Expressing feelings: (expressing state after death)	<i>I know I have been a pain at the best of times but I am with nan and granddad now</i>
(expressing love)	<i>so I love you</i>
(expressing goodbye)	<i>and goodbye</i>
Giving directions: (giving belongings)	<i>tell [name] that she can have my room</i>
(asking to do something)	<i>tell [name] that I am sorry for every thing sory [name] and tell dad he is the best</i>
(giving belongings)	<i>and he can have my xbox and games and mum you can have every thing else.</i>
(asking to do sth)	<i>Please be strong for me!</i>
Signing off: (salutation and name)	<i>Lots of love from [name] Xxx Xx X [heart figure]</i>

#11, F, A1990, Appendix 1

Figure 3.3 A fully coded text of female suicide note written after 1990

Addressing recipient: (salutation & name)	<i>To: BNPD</i>
Apologizing: (saying sorry)	<i>I am sorry you had to respond to this – very sorry.</i>
Expressing feelings: (expressing personal feelings)	<i>I have embarrassed and shamed my LEO family and the Sherrif's office.</i>
(expressing regret)	<i>For that I am also deeply sorry.</i>

<i>(expressing personal feelings)</i>	<i>Most of all I have embarrassed my family and</i>
<i>(expressing regret)</i>	<i>they are not deserving this embarrassment.</i>
<i>Giving directions: (asking to do sth)</i>	<i>Tell them I love them very much and that I am sorry. My wife, Christina, cell number [number]. She went somewhere with our kids. The back slider is unlocked and open – in the garage is a ladder above is my holster and spare mag which I had hidden there some time ago Tell Christina I love her</i> #32, M, A1990, Appendix 2

Figure 3.4 A fully coded text of male suicide note written after 1990

After the moves have been identified, they were examined and broken down into smaller units to see the realization of the steps within each move. For example, there are several steps that were considered to be the building blocks of the move *providing explanation*: (1) providing larger context on suicide act (e.g. *I have been like this for way too long*); (2) giving reasons or justifying death (e.g. *I will only make this worse for you by living*); (3) taking responsibility or ascribing responsibility to others (e.g. *it's bullying that kills me*); and (4) describing means of suicide (e.g. *I am going to shoot myself*). Then, following a simple calculation of the number of occurrences, the moves and steps were categorized into *obligatory*, *quasi-obligatory*, and *optional* moves within the text before a generic structure was found.

3.5 Conclusion of Research Methodology

This chapter has discussed the methodology of the study. It shows how the study is conducted. This includes the research questions, the data collection technique, framework for analysis and data analysis including some examples of analysis. The data presentation and discussion will be discussed in Chapter Four.