CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Justification of methodology

The methods chosen to carry out this study were a case study, a survey, use of literature (previously reviewed) and documentary evidence as appropriate. Because of the numbers of issues raised by the research questions and the need to associate them with current practice in Mountfield CDU, I decided not only to do a survey, discussed below, but also to do a case study of this CD Unit (see beginning of Results, Chapter 4). A Case Study complements and "puts flesh on the bones" of a survey (Bell, 1987, p. 11), adding an important third dimension – actual practice – to theory and figures.

However, as this was only one example of a secondary CD Unit (and the researcher is aware others have differing clientele and operational policies), it is impossible to generalise from it. I myself as a teacher-researcher was bound to present a very subjective view, even when attempting to be objective by observation, formal and informal. Edwards & Talbot (1999) have noted that the case study can be used in practitioner research to illustrate a set of principles, to provide some detailed description of a topic of interest, or to explore a field of study and gather information on it (p. 51–53).

This MCDU case study attempted to illustrate principles by considering barriers in learning MFL and strategies to reduce them. It tried to describe how the MFL experience is approached in this setting with these pupils. It attempted to explore the field of study, as defined in the title, and gather information on it. In order to do this exploration, data was collected and assimilated from formal and informal observation, field notes, vignettes and reference to (researcher-written) profiles and reports, and individualised educational programmes. Because of the small number in the MCDU (up to 12) and its self-sufficient location within the secondary school, it could be seen almost as a living and evolving tableau which has seen over the past three years the development of MFL courses specifically differentiated for this

group. The case study therefore described this tableau at one point in time (Spring 2001) with one set of high-functioning communication-disordered pupils with their individual and group needs. It could not therefore produce reliable data, which could be replicated by another researcher, as the variables would change with the mix of pupils. It attempted to provide data, which may be valid in considering these specific research questions relating to the MFL learning experience of the 2001 class groups in the MCDU. All confidential data has been presented in an anonymous way, observing ethical standards. The necessary consents were given. The survey was the other principal means of collecting data, comprising three questionnaires and four interviews.

The survey is described by Edwards & Talbot (1999, p. 88) as being like an onion, with data from questionnaires similar to peeling off some outer layers of skin, but being supplemented by interviews to get to the in-depth layers. As the case study, mentioned above, has provided the core on to which others build layers of data, the survey seemed a useful method to adopt to complement it.

Bell (1987, p. 13) has suggested that a representative selection of the population can be targeted by a survey, which was my intention with Questionnaires One and Two (see appendix one.)

As the focus of my research is not a well-researched topic, I needed to get some background information accessed from a distance. As Edwards & Talbot point out, questionnaires are useful, although on the minus side they provide neither depth nor a good return.

Questionnaire One (see appendix one)
This targeted some education authorities for a broad picture of the situation of CD pupils in schools, where there is no dedicated autism base. These were sent by post to 10 regions in different parts of Scotland, and although I received replies from over half, only three completed enough of this questionnaire for the information to be useful. However, I received some helpful information from some of the others, for

example, the Highland Council Gaelic medium education programme report, mentioned earlier. Therefore, it was a worthwhile exercise. The data collected from this questionnaire helped me towards answering research questions one and two.

Questionnaire Two (see appendix one)

This was sent to identified communication disorder units attached to six secondary schools across Scotland. Again, it was a practical way to collect a lot of detailed information about this group and their modern language learning experience without travelling extensively around Scotland, although another unit outside Glasgow was visited. There was no return from one recently established base. Another unit was unable to assist much, as I learnt by a telephone call from their principal teacher that a modern language is not offered to their pupils (which is interesting in itself, but not explored in this study). Data gathered in this questionnaire was partly quantitative, but mainly qualitative, some questions being answered very fully. This data has helped to give some triangulation to the case study on Mountfield CDU, without which it would be even harder to assess how typical the findings at MCDU are. Inevitably, the data will be presented with unintentional bias on the part of the researcher.

Questionnaire Three (see appendix one)

This questionnaire was sent to Mountfield CDU parents specifically to address RQ 4, which tried to probe parents' opinions about the value of their child's experience of learning a foreign language. The response was excellent, and parents (although not asked to do this) appeared to have discussed the questions with their children and to have given carefully considered responses. The questionnaire was returned anonymously, as I hoped for answers that would be compromised as little as possible. The questionnaire seemed the best way to get this information rather than at a parents' night when other issues have to be discussed. The parents who replied seemed happy to co-operate.

Interviews were also carried out, in order to explore the four interviewees' special area of expertise, which would contribute a richness of data, relating to the MFL experience of my target group. The expert witnesses were able to stress significant

strategies and findings (theirs or others) and gave me deeper insight into these four interviewees' slant on my research questions. I paid heed to Edwards & Talbot's cautions on interviews (p. 101), and tried to keep them short (half an hour) in order not to overburden either the interviewee or myself (from the point of view of analysis).

The interviews

These interviews were semi-structured to allow some comparable data to be collected, but also to allow the individual interviewee some freedom to expand on points as they chose and elaborate on their specialist interest. This data was mainly qualitative and, although subjective, gives some triangulation to other data from the questionnaires and the case study. The interviews are probably not reliable data, as they are a subjective view on that day with that interviewer and interviewee.

They were conducted with some expert witnesses in various aspects of my research:
a) Mainstream modern languages senior teacher (who has taught CD pupil 2 years)
b) Network support manager and dyslexia researcher
c) Assistant Director, MFL research organisation
d) Former MFL Principal Teacher, currently author/researcher MFL/SfL issues