
Using Focus Groups in Language Research

Arthur McNeill

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Abstract

This paper examines the potential of the focus group as a research method in language studies. In social sciences research, focus groups are becoming increasingly popular as a means of gathering data. It is logical to anticipate that the focus group can also be a suitable research method for investigating certain topics related to language. The paper describes how focus groups are typically organized and run, then addresses some of the on-going concerns about the handling of focus group data. Provided certain safeguards are in place concerning data analysis and provided the procedures for handling data are made as explicit as possible, the focus group is likely to become a welcome addition to the research methods available to scholars working in the field of language studies.

Introduction

The focus group appears to be enjoying an almost fashionable status as a research method in the social sciences. The interactions that take place when several stakeholders are invited to engage in a structured discussion of a topic of mutual interest can yield valuable insights that can serve as research data. Yet, the applicability of the focus group in language studies remains largely unexplored. In the field of language education, it is not uncommon for projects to wish to explore assumptions and beliefs. So it is

reasonable to assume that focus groups might be of interest to scholars working in the field of language research. Traditionally, projects that examine assumptions and beliefs in language education have tended to rely on instruments such as questionnaires and interviews, both individual and group. This paper examines some of the special features of focus group research, with a view to identifying research contexts within language studies where focus groups may be particularly suited.

In the minds of many members of the public, focus groups are associated with the market research of commercial companies. For decades, developers of new products have approached consumers in the street or shopping mall and persuaded them to participate in a focus group discussion on aspects of a new product's design. Focus groups are obviously useful to manufacturers because they provide insights into the tastes and preferences of potential consumers. But increasingly, the focus group has also become a popular method of collecting data in academic contexts. However, because of its more traditional association with market research, it may be useful to consider how focus groups have been used in academic studies. This paper begins by examining some of the claims that are made on behalf of focus group research and then looks at some of the practical issues that need to be addressed before using focus groups in language studies. The paper also makes reference to a language policy study, undertaken by the author, in which extensive use was made of focus groups.

Focus groups in academic research

A number of definitions of "focus group" can be found in the literature. There appears to be broad agreement that the term refers to a group of interacting individuals having a common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue (e.g. Morgan 1997 and 1998; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson 2001).

Focus groups are believed to be particularly useful in policy research, especially where the communication between policy makers and their audience is crucial (Morgan & Krueger 1993: 15). A special feature associated with focus groups is the respect given to the research subjects, i.e. the participants in the focus group discussions. As Morgan and Krueger (1993:15) put it, focus groups mean “research *with* people, not *on* people”. Participants are carefully selected and receive individual invitations to join a group discussion. Since participants are often chosen because of their professional status or expertise, focus groups may reduce the gap between research and practice. However, for many researchers, the most attractive feature of the focus group is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that might be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan 1997). Morgan & Krueger (op.cit.) summarize the strengths of the focus group as follows:

“By creating and sustaining an atmosphere that promotes meaningful interaction, focus groups convey a humane sensitivity, a willingness to listen without being defensive, and a respect for opposing views that is unique and beneficial in these emotionally charged environments.” (p18)

Reflecting on his experience of using focus groups for research in lifelong learning, Field (2000:323) gives a cautious welcome to the method and commends it for creating a “dialogue between the researcher and researched”. A more general conclusion prompted by Field’s experience is that focus groups are particularly valuable in educational research when investigating the impact of policy changes upon staff.

Organizing and running focus groups

A successful focus group discussion is one in which the participants engage with the topics and interact with other group members, so great care needs to be taken when selecting participants. While it is impossible to know with any certainty how well group members will actually interact with one another, the research team should try to select members with different backgrounds and experience. At the same time, attention needs to

be paid to the status of the participants, with a view to avoiding 'power hierarchies', in which some participants may feel inhibited about expressing views in the presence of senior (or junior) colleagues.

Once participants have been identified, they should receive a formal invitation to attend together with some background details of the project. The venue should be suitable for a group discussion, such as a conference room. In order to make the participants feel welcome and relaxed, it is common to provide refreshments.

The size of a focus group can vary, but groups consisting of between eight and ten participants appear to be the most popular. The management of the discussion requires two people: (a) a moderator, who leads the discussion, and (b) a note-taker who usually sits outside the group and takes notes. The note-taker is generally also responsible for making an audio or video recording of the discussion. It is important that the moderator is able to give his or her full attention to engaging in and animating the discussion, without having to attend to tasks such as taking notes and operating equipment. The typical duration of a focus group discussion is between 40 and 50 minutes.

The discussion is guided by a set of questions prepared in advance by the research team. Five or six questions are usually sufficient. The content of the focus group questions obviously depends on the questions driving the research project as a whole and the specific contribution expected of the focus groups. When a research team opts for the focus group as a research method, they generally hope to elicit ideas, opinions and background details which might not be identified through more traditional instruments such as a survey or individual or group interview. It would, therefore, not be appropriate to spend much time in a focus group asking questions to obtain facts that are in the public domain, such as the length of a programme, textbooks used, staff teaching loads, qualifications, etc. The opinions and beliefs of the participants are more likely to be of interest, as well as their reasons for holding them. The way members respond to other members' contributions may also provide valuable insights. Questions should, therefore, aim to uncover participants' own views and opinions.

However, since the group members may not know one another and may need to be “warmed up”, it can be useful to start with some non-threatening questions, such as asking how familiar participants are with the topic area. This allows the moderator to decide whether to give the group any additional background information about the topic before proceeding with the discussion. The questions simply provide a basic structure for the discussion, while allowing plenty of opportunity for participants to engage freely with the topic. As with the chairing of any discussion, moderating a focus group calls for a range of communication skills. For example, the moderator should make the participants feel welcome, explain how the discussion will be structured, provide essential background information, elicit individual responses, encourage all members to contribute and move the discussion forward once a topic has been exhausted. It can also be helpful for the moderator to provide an occasional summary of what has been discussed and to check that members agree with the summary.

During the discussion, the note-taker does not need to take detailed notes, since the meeting is recorded and the recording will usually be transcribed. However, the note-taker should make a note of anything that will help with the subsequent transcription. If the discussion is video-taped, it should be easy to know which participant is responsible for which contribution since the transcriber can see who is talking on the video. However, if an audio recording is used, it can be difficult for the transcriber to identify individual speakers. So, it is helpful if the note-taker keeps a note of the participants’ names and draws up a seating plan of the discussion. The note-taker can also note down any key words used by the speakers which will help the transcriber to identify them in the transcription. An alternative arrangement is to ask each participant to say their name before speaking. While this approach can make it easier to produce an accurate transcription of the discussion, the formality of having to say one’s name before speaking can inhibit the natural flow of the interaction and reduce the quality of the contributions.

Analyzing focus group data

There are two basic approaches to analyzing focus group data: (a) a strictly qualitative or ethnographic summary, and (b) a systematic coding of the data by means of content analysis. When deciding which approach to adopt, researchers should bear in mind that some of the skepticism among academics about the value of focus groups probably arose from the perception that data derived from discussions can be subjective in nature and open to different interpretations. However, as Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook (2007) argue, focus group data analysis and interpretation can be as rigorous as that generated by any other research method. So, in order to demonstrate that focus group data are handled in as objective a manner as possible, researchers need to provide explicit details of their data analysis procedures. According to Krippendorff (1980), the key to handling such data is to locate a set of items that can be systematically counted. A similar approach is recommended by Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook (2007), who advocate the production of a classification system, based on an initial reading of the transcription, for major topics and issues. The amount of material coded for any one topic obviously depends on the importance of the topic to the overall research questions and the variation in the discussion.

In order to identify themes in the data, members of the research team need to listen to the recorded discussions and read the transcriptions, probably several times; they should also refer to the note-taker's notes. This part of the data analysis should involve all members of the research team, so that there is consensus about identifying the recurrent themes and in proposing the main ideas and the related supporting ideas. This approach to analyzing qualitative data is essentially meaning-focused and involves grouping together statements that are related semantically and then counting the number of times a particular idea is expressed. Although it is possible to subject transcription data to electronic analysis using computer software to group ideas according to the occurrence of particular words and phrases, there are limits to what the software can do. In semi-formal discussions such as focus groups, a wide range of language can be used to refer to the same idea, so a meaning-based approach to identifying themes is likely to

be more useful than an electronic, form-focused method. The following section explains how themes were identified in a project that used focus groups to investigate the benchmarking of foreign languages at universities in Scotland (Spöring, McNeill & Hartley 2002; McNeill, Spöring & Hartley 2004).

The Scottish Modern Language Benchmarking Project

Part of the above project set out to investigate the assumptions and beliefs of academic staff responsible for university language courses, concerning the learning outcomes of their programmes. Although most Scottish universities offer degree programmes in foreign languages, it was known that some programmes attached importance to developing students' L2 proficiency, while others focused more on developing students' knowledge of L2 literature, civilisation and culture, as well as formal knowledge of linguistic systems. It was hoped that, by engaging teaching staff from different institutions in a structured discussion, some insights would be gained into the ideas and principles underlying the various programmes and how these were or could be benchmarked, particularly concerning learning outcomes. Altogether ten focus group meetings took place, with representatives of fourteen institutions. Each discussion was led by a moderator, who was guided by the following five questions (and sub-questions):

1. What do you know about benchmarking?
2. Which benchmarking standards do you know? Are you familiar with them in more detail? To what extent do you and / or your department use benchmarking standards? Why?
3. What problems do you see in the use of benchmarking standards, generally speaking?
4. What positive aspects do you see in benchmarking, generally speaking?
5. What are your expectations with regard to the subject benchmarking statements that will be published shortly by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2002)?

The questions used to guide focus group discussions simply provide an underlying framework for a natural discussion and should not be used to interrogate the members. In the case of the above set of questions, the first two were intended to provide the moderator with an idea of the participants' familiarity with the notion of language benchmarking. Depending on the responses, the moderator would supply information about benchmarking if this was considered helpful before moving on to the second and main part of the discussion, which addressed participants' opinions and beliefs.

The analysis of the data led to the identification of twenty 'main ideas'. These ideas were used to produce the classification systems shown in Tables 1 and 2. The twenty 'main ideas' were subsequently divided into two groups, labelled 'Concerns' and 'Positive Aspects'. Some of the twenty topics are broader than others and, in a number of cases, the 'main idea' was sub-divided into closely related 'supporting ideas'. This handling of the qualitative data relied on the judgements of three team members working together throughout the categorization process. Sections of the transcribed text that were judged to support a main idea were labeled and assembled under the respective category. In reporting the data, the 'main ideas' were presented in tables, in descending order of occurrence. The tables were followed by a discussion of each idea, based on the sections of the transcribed text assigned to it.

The eleven "main ideas" derived from the discussion groups that express concern about benchmarking are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 : Main ideas ("concerns") identified in the focus group discussions (from McNeill, Spöring & Hartley 2004)

CODE	IDEA
01C	Benchmarking (BM) systems are politically driven.
02C	Languages are essentially different from other subjects.
03C	To reduce foreign language study to countable features is dangerous/simplistic.
04C	Negative consequences of a prescriptive BM system.

CODE	IDEA
05C	Need to distinguish (a) internal, and (b) external use of BMs
06C	Tension between the different purposes of language studies
07C	Limitations of BMs as generic descriptors
08C	BMs are associated with a lowering of standards.
09C	Marginalization of non-specialist language provision
10C	Tension between language and culture in programmes
11C	Lack of transparency concerning value-addedness dimension of BM statements

Nine distinct ideas were identified concerning positive aspects of language benchmarking. These are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Main ideas ('positive aspects') identified in the focus group discussions (from McNeill, Spöring & Hartley 2004)

CODE	IDEA
01PA	BMs provide an opportunity to market modern languages
02PA	Creating BM statements at institutional level is beneficial to staff
03PA	Provision of common terms of reference is generally helpful
04PA	Positive impact of the Common European Framework for Languages(Council of Europe 2001)
05PA	BMs can improve external examining
06PA	International perspectives: allows comparison outside UK
07PA	Creates a discourse community of university language teachers
08PA	Provides meaningful reference points for employers/students
09PA	Improves the interface between secondary and tertiary education

The above examples serve as an illustration of how themes were identified in one particular project. However, as with qualitative research generally, there are other ways of handling

textual data. The final choice of approach should obviously depend on the actual data obtained and the patterns identified by the researchers.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the potential of the focus group in language research. Following its growing popularity as a research method in the social sciences and its recent adoption by applied linguistics, there is every reason to assume that focus groups will become a mainstream research method in language studies. There is little doubt that the insights obtained from the interaction of members of a focus group can be extremely valuable in investigations of certain topics. In the field of language studies, topics related to policy changes appear to be particularly suited to focus group research because beliefs, reactions, fears and expectations can all be probed and uncovered when participants engage in a structured discussion of issues that are of genuine concern to them.

The Author

Arthur McNeill is Director of the Language Center at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He was formerly Head of TESOL at Edinburgh University's School of Education and has served as director of the English language centres at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Universities of Surrey and Dundee in UK. His academic interests include second language vocabulary and teacher language awareness. He was principal investigator of a recently completed project which developed an English vocabulary curriculum for the twelve years of free education in Hong Kong. In addition to his academic publications, he has co-authored the *Step-Ahead* series of textbooks for the new senior secondary curriculum in Hong Kong. He has also served as the President of the Hong Kong Association for Applied Linguistics. During 2008-9, he worked at Asian University in Thailand, where he was Head of the Education Department and Programme Leader of the MEd (TESOL) degree. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Wales.

References

- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M. & Robson, K. (2001) *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage
- Council of Europe (2001), *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Strasbourg: Cambridge University Press
- Field, J. (2000) Researching lifelong learning through focus groups. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (pp. 323-335), Vol. 24, No. 3
- Krippendorff, K. (1980) *Content analysis: a practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, Ca: Sage
- McNeill, A, Spöring, M and Hartley, L. (2004) Benchmarking modern languages in UK higher education: insights from the language teaching community. *Language Learning*, Winter 2004, 30 47-51
- Morgan, D. L. (1993) *Successful focus groups: advancing the state of the art*. Newbury Park, Ca: Sage
- Morgan, D. L (1997) *Focus groups as qualitative research*. London: Sage
- Morgan, D.L. (1998) *The Focus group guidebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Morgan, D.L. and Krueger, R.A. (1993) When to use focus groups and why. In Morgan (1993)
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2002), *Subject benchmark statements: languages and related studies (LRS)* <http://www.qaa.ac.uk>
- Spöring, M., McNeill, A., Hartley, L. (2002), *Modern language benchmarking in the post-compulsory sector*. Research report of SCOTLANG-funded project. Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (SCILT) at the University of Stirling and University of Dundee
- Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.N. & Rook, D.W. (2007) *Focus groups: theory and practice*. (2nd edition) Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage

