

6.5 Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews are sometimes treated as a subtype of interviewing but because both the format and the interviewer's role are considerably different in the interviewing process, I find it more appropriate to keep the two methods separate. Focus group interviews—as the name suggests—involve a group format whereby an interviewer records the responses of a small group (usually 6–12 members). This is obviously an economical way to gather a relatively large amount of qualitative data and therefore focus groups are used for a variety of purposes in many different fields. The name originally comes from market research but now the terms 'focus group interview' and 'group interview' are used interchangeably. The method has become familiar to the larger public when political parties have started to use it to gauge voter reaction to some planned policies and group interviews also feature frequently on television.

The focus group format is based on the collective experience of group brainstorming, that is, participants thinking together, inspiring and challenging each other, and reacting to the emerging issues and points. This within-group interaction can yield high-quality data as it can create a synergistic environment that results in a deep and insightful discussion. The format also allows for various degrees of structure, depending on the extent to which the researcher relies on an interview guide/protocol rather than giving the participants freedom to discuss some broad topics. Just like with one-to-one interviews, the semi-structured type of focus group is the most common format because it includes both open- and closed-ended questions posed by the researcher.

6.5.1 Characteristics of the focus groups

The size of a focus group ranges between 6–10 (sometimes 12) people. Fewer than six people would limit the potential of the 'collective wisdom' whereas too large a size makes it difficult for everyone to participate. When designing a focus group study, the two key technical questions to decide are (a) whether to have homogeneous or heterogeneous people in a group; and (b) how many groups to have.

- *Composition* Although, in line with the principles of maximum variation sampling (see Section 6.2.3), heterogeneous samples consisting of dissimilar people could in theory be useful in providing varied and rich data that covers all angles, it has been found that the dynamics of the focus group works better with homogeneous samples. Therefore, in order to obtain

a wide range of information, the usual strategy is to have several groups which, as a whole, are different from each but each of which is made up of similar people; this is usually referred to as 'segmentation' and it involves within-group homogeneity and intergroup heterogeneity in the sample.

- *Number or parallel focus groups* The standard practice is to run several focus groups in any research project. In this way we can mitigate any idiosyncratic results that occur because of some unexpected internal or external factor that affects the dynamics of a group. Thus, in order to achieve adequate breadth and depth of information, it is usually recommended that a project involve 4–5 groups as a minimum, with a few more if possible.

6.5.2 Conducting the focus group interview

In focus group interviews the interviewer is usually referred to as the 'moderator', and this special name reflects the fact that the researcher's role differs from that in one-to-one interviews. Although they still need to ask questions, during the session they need to function more as facilitators of the discussion than as interviewers in the traditional sense. Because the dynamic of the focus group is one of the unique features of this method, the researcher's role inevitably involves some group leadership functions, including making sure that nobody dominates the floor and that even the shyer participants have a chance to express their views. In addition, moderators need to prevent any dominating and inhibiting group opinion—or 'groupthink'—from emerging by actively encouraging group members to think critically (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003). It is because of these multiple responsibilities that research methodologists usually agree that a focus group is only as good as its moderator.

Thus, focus group moderation can be a challenging task, particularly in the light of the fact that a focus group interview can last as long as three hours (although the usual length is between 1–2 hours). The process starts with an introductory phase, in which the moderator welcomes the participants, outlines the purpose of the discussion and sets the parameters of the interview in terms of length and confidentiality. Researchers should at this point also spend some time explaining why they record the interview and what sort of technical issues this raises in a group discussion (particularly talking one at a time). Finally, it is important to emphasize that the discussion is about personal views and experiences and therefore there are no right or wrong answers.

The actual discussion follows broadly the interview guide but even a semi-structured guide does not usually contain more than 5–10 broad, open-ended questions accompanied by a few closed-ended questions. After all, the strength of this format is the discussion that emerges about a broad topic. The moderator can steer the discussion by using probes, and body language and gesturing are effective devices to control the flow and keeping the group

focused. Particular care must be taken to also allow socially less desirable views to be voiced because in a group session respondents may be more reluctant to share dispreferred answers than in a one-to-one interview.

In the concluding phase, the moderator needs to ask if there are any issues or concerns that require further discussion or have not yet been addressed. Because of the group nature of the session we also need to include a short winding down phase and some positive feedback so that nobody leaves the session being dissatisfied with themselves or with the social image they may have projected.

6.5.3 Strengths and weaknesses of focus group interviewing

Focus groups are highly versatile: as mentioned earlier, they can be used in a wide range of areas, from market research to political opinion probing, and in educational contexts they are also often used for programme evaluation to assess the effectiveness of a particular course to understand what was or was not working and why. People do not usually mind participating in focus groups—in fact, they tend to find the sessions enjoyable and stimulating—and the interviews typically yield rich data. These merits, coupled with the quick turnaround, make the method popular.

Because of the flexible and information-rich nature of the method, focus groups are often used in mixed methods research. Although they can be used as a stand-alone method of inquiry, this is not that common except for some areas where focus groups are well established (most notably market research) because researchers often feel that they have more control over the content and can elicit deeper and more ‘unedited’ personal meaning in one-to-one interviews. In applied linguistic research they have been widely used for generating ideas to inform the development of questionnaires and subsequent deep interviews.

The downside of focus group interviews is that they need quite a bit of preparation to set up, and to do them well the moderator needs to be able to carry out several functions simultaneously. There is also more need to improvise because the number of questions to be asked following the interview guide is relatively low and a lot of the content emerges from well-managed group discussion facilitated by probe questions. With regard to the content of the elicited material, Smithson (2000) mentions two possible limitations: the tendency for certain types of socially acceptable opinion to emerge and for certain types of participant to dominate the research process. Finally, an important technical point is that transcribing such an interview can be rather difficult because of the number of people (i.e. voices) involved. For this reason, researchers sometimes also prepare a video recording of the interviews—ancillary to audiotaping—so that they can identify who is speaking at any one time.