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Focus groups

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Focus groups
Capturing the dynamics of group interaction

Nicola Galloway

Introduction
There are many qualitative methodologies available in the interdisciplinary field of applied linguistics to investigate real-life language-related problems. Applied linguistics researchers draw on other fields for theoretical and methodological approaches, yet despite the numerous advantages that focus groups offer, they have been given little consideration in the field and are rarely used as a single method in their own right. A brief glance at abstracts reporting empirical studies in the *Applied Linguistics* journal from 2007 to 2017 reveal that only one abstract cited the use of focus groups in the study (see Santello, 2015). In *TESOL Quarterly*, five abstracts report the use of focus groups, compared to 55 reporting the use of interviews and ten using questionnaires. There are extensive guides and full-length books on the practical details relating to focus group design, including topics such as participant recruitment, developing a topic guide and moderator instructions, transcription protocols, and so on (cf. Davis, 2017; Krueger & Casey, 2014; Liamputtong, 2011). In this chapter, rather than provide a detailed overview of the practicalities of designing a successful focus group, I will instead explore their origins and how they are used, the specific advantages to the applied linguistics researcher to generate rich data, and some careful considerations to bear in mind when using this qualitative method.

What are focus groups?
While there are many variations, in simple terms, focus groups can generally be defined as group discussions which focus on a specific topic or situation (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) or “a way of collecting qualitative data, which – essentially – involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). For applied linguistics researchers interested in examining group interaction, it is this interaction that distinguishes them from the qualitative interview; in focus groups, the emphasis is on the group, not the individual. Discussions usually last around 1–2 hours. The exact time needed is difficult to estimate; although focus groups can be as short as 30 minutes, or last for a full 2 hours, depending on the topic.
Focus groups

and other factors. Allowing for 2 hours enables the researcher to develop in-depth discussions, and plan accordingly. They are sometimes self-moderated, but discussions are usually facilitated by a moderator (sometimes the researcher), who presents the topics for discussion (usually a set of prompts, questions, or newspaper article, and sometimes a game or some kind of role-play activity) and facilitates an interactive discussion, encouraging members to talk to one another. Focus group researchers may also use video stimulated recall, beginning with a short video clip to stimulate participants’ memory of, or gain their opinions on, a particular event, for example.

Various techniques are employed such as probing silent members to join in the discussion, asking follow-up questions, using open-ended or indirect questioning techniques, monitoring talkative members, etc. This can be done in either a structured or a loose way, but the aim is to facilitate the conversation, not to offer the moderator’s viewpoint. A moderator ‘team’ is also an option, with the lead moderator facilitating the discussion and the assistant recording the session and taking notes.

A “focus group isn’t just getting a bunch of people together to talk. A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures” (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 2). Focus group discussions are organised to enable the researcher to understand how a group feels or thinks about a specific topic or situation. Group composition is also an important consideration. Group sizes can vary from 4–12, although 6–8 is common. A number of dimensions to the research can influence group size, including the topic and the aims, the age of participants, the time allotted for each question, and the duration of the overall discussion. The group should be big enough to cover a diversity of opinions, yet small enough to ensure that members feel comfortable to share their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and experiences (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). Depending on the research aims, members of the discussion can be strangers or pre-existing or bona fide groups (those that know each other), homogeneous (e.g. students studying the same major in the same university with similar experiences), or heterogeneous (students studying different majors with varied experiences).

In my own research (Galloway, 2011, 2017), I recruited homogeneous groups of Japanese university students to explore their attitudes towards English. To ensure students were fully engaged in the discussion, homogeneous groups were deemed appropriate to provide a comfortable atmosphere and facilitate an open discussion, encouraging them to draw on shared experiences and relate to each other’s comments. In another study, however (Galloway et al., 2017; Rose & Galloway, 2019), I used a mixture of both homogenous (students studying in English medium instruction [EMI] programmes, colleagues working on EMI programmes) and heterogeneous groups (instructors delivering content through English and those teaching English for academic purposes [EAP]). The mix facilitated an examination of what certain groups have in common, as well as those with less in common to provide more opportunity for interactional analysis. There are practical issues with sampling procedures and participant availability, however. In the EMI study, maximum variation sampling was preferred, but it proved difficult to recruit participants with markedly different forms of experience and attitudes due to the overall time frame of the study, the limited time available at each research site, and staff and student timetabling restrictions. Various sampling techniques can be used in focus group research, including probability sampling (random sampling, stratified random sampling, systematic sampling, cluster sampling) and non-probability sampling, which are likely to be more common, such as quota sampling and dimensional sampling, snowball sampling, convenience or opportunity sampling, and maximum variation/critical case/extreme deviant case sampling. Over-recruitment is advisable; in my own studies, several sessions had to be cancelled when participants failed to show up.
Focus groups are usually held in face-to-face settings, although with technological developments, virtual focus groups have become more common, conducted via Skype and similar means. The environment should be non-threatening to encourage a rich discussion (see Rolland, Dewaele & Costa, this volume). Focus groups are usually taped or video-recorded and then transcribed before analysis. They can vary from a single focus group to multiple discussions with either the same or different groups over the duration of a more longitudinal study. Multiple focus groups can facilitate saturation and data triangulation when used in combination with other methods. The number of groups needed to reach saturation will vary; it may be effective to plan to conduct three or four groups before deciding whether additional groups are needed for saturation. Additional groups may be composed of those from the same participant group or more diverse groups. The number of groups may also depend on the type of design. In my EMI research (Galloway, et al., 2017; Rose & Galloway, 2018), multiple-category design (see Krueger & Casey, 2014) required the comparison of one group to another within a category (Chinese and Japanese students studying in EMI programmes) and from one category to another category (staff and students). This also reflected Krueger and Casey’s (2014) double-layer design, which used multiple layers: geographical location as one, and different participant types in another. However, as noted, the time frame of the study, participant availability and timetabling restrictions limited the organisation of further groups for saturation purposes. A further limitation is that these studies were conducted in a fairly small number of settings. Focus group researchers with the time and resources may want to conduct large-scale projects involving broad geographical representation, particularly if those organising the project want to show, for example, that they have made an effort to achieve a representative sample of the target audience.

**Origins and use**

Focus groups can be traced back to 1926, when Emory Bogardus described group interviews in social science research (Liamputtong, 2011). Krueger and Casey (2014) add that their origins lie in the movement towards non-directive interviewing in the social sciences. Originally called ‘focused interviewing’, variations of this method of non-directive interviewing were used during the Second World War to explore public reactions to wartime propaganda on the radio, the involvement of the US in the war, and morale in the US military (Merton, 1987). Lazarsfeld and Merton are credited with formalising the method (Madriz, 2000); the ‘focused interview’ (Merton & Kendall, 1946) was detailed in the *American Journal of Sociology*, later becoming the title of a book (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). Focused interviews were reported to encourage participants to reveal sensitive information when they felt safe and comfortable with people like themselves and were used to generate survey questions and complement quantitative research.

However, the influence of focused interviews on academic research was fairly short-lived and the method was not a dominant part of social science research for decades, mostly due to the preoccupation with quantitative procedures; something that prompted my own use of the method when investigating attitudes to the English language (Galloway, 2011, 2017). Focused interviews were later adopted by market researchers in the 1950s as a useful way to listen to a group of people’s opinions on products and services. In the 1980s, they also began being used in health education and health promotion. In the last three decades, they have become a substantive qualitative methodology in a variety of fields. This resurgence in interest, however, has not had a major impact on the field of applied linguistics. Benson, Chik, Gao and Huang’s (2009) review of ten major journals on language teaching and learning between 1997 and 2006 reported that 22% of articles used qualitative techniques, and none of these studies used...
Focus groups as a single method. As noted in the introduction, my brief review of abstracts in *Applied Linguistics* and *TESOL Quarterly* revealed that this method is often overlooked in the field, particularly as a single method of data collection. Indeed, in Starfield’s (2016) discussion of changes in research methods in English for specific purposes (ESP) research, she outlines various methods, yet refers to focus groups as “other forms of data collection” (p. 154). Similarly, in Richards, Ross and Seedhouse’s (2012) *Research Methods for Applied Language Studies*, focus groups are hardly mentioned compared to other methods of data collection. They are given slightly more attention, albeit not a lot, in Dörnyei’s (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. The *TESOL Quarterly* research guidelines (Mahboob, Paltridge & Phakiti, 2016) provide guidelines for article submission, outlining various research methods used in certain designs and providing sample studies, yet do not mention focus groups or cite any studies that have used this method in applied linguistics research. Thus, while journals in the field may seem open to accepting a variety of methodologies, it would appear that focus group research is often overlooked. This is rather surprising given the wide array of benefits they offer.

Advantages of focus groups

Applied linguistics researchers operate from diverse ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives, yet focus groups offer numerous benefits for a variety of approaches and research designs.

**Economical**

Focus groups can be a fast, economical and efficient way to obtain data from more than one participant at the same time. In my own research (Galloway et al., 2017), for example, there was limited time to visit each institution and, in some sites, there was only enough time available to conduct a single focus group due to timetabling constraints. They can help increase sample sizes in qualitative studies as they “are efficient in the sense that they generate large quantities of material . . . in a relatively short time” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 397), and are relatively easy to run.

**Comfortable**

The socially orientated environment can provide a relaxing and comfortable environment for focus group participants, thus making participants feel at ease and encouraging them to disclose more information than they may in an individual one-on-one interview. This may be attractive to those researching sensitive topics. In my own research (Galloway, 2011, 2017), this non-directive technique was favoured to elicit ‘non-native’ English speakers’ opinions on both ‘native’ English and ‘native’ English speaking teachers, something I was concerned about given the fact that I, myself, was a ‘native’ speaking English teacher.

**Group dynamics and more fully articulated accounts**

Focus groups can be used in both essentialist and social constructionist frameworks (Wilkinson, 1998), that is, for those working under the assumption that people have pre-existing attitudes, opinions and understandings, and those who want to examine collective sense-making and explore how ideas are co-constructed. For those working within an essentialist epistemological framework, where individuals are seen to have their own ideas, opinions and understandings,
focus groups can still provide a useful way to elicit individuals’ views. They can be used as a means to elicit personal ideas, beliefs and opinions and in this way, their purpose is to elicit individual viewpoints, opinions and understandings. In Galloway (2011, 2017), for example, focus groups provided further insight into individual viewpoints expressed in the interviews. However, they also provided a means to examine collective sense-making. Their distinctive feature is the “explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Thus, for applied linguistics researchers operating in a social constructionist epistemological framework, where the social word is seen as being constructed by those individuals involved, they offer a means to examine how attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and experiences about a topic are co-constructed, silenced and sometimes modified in the social interactions between people during a focus group discussion. For example, they can be a useful way to examine how agreement is reached, as shown in extract 1, where students discuss the positive influence of a Global Englishes course on their attitudes towards English. Here, Sorisu prompted the discussion, noting how the course changed her attitudes. Ayumi agreed, and when Sorisu added further explanation, Ayumi added further agreement.

**Extract 1 (Galloway, 2011)**

SORISU: After taking this class, my way of thinking has changed.
AYUMI: Yeah, me too.
SORISU: I didn’t know the kind of English at all . . .
AYUMI: Yeah, definitely

Focus groups can also illuminate how attitudes can change as a result of the group discussion. Extract 2 demonstrates how Nobuko’s statement changed in the context of discussion surrounding the use of English in EMI classes. Initially, she disagreed with Simon, noting that it is natural for students to communicate in their mother tongue. Simon returned to his point that it is important for all students to be included, prompting Nobuko to change her opinion, pointing out that students prefer to communicate in English. This also prompted Kumiko to add that a degree of mother tongue usage is appropriate, which then led the group to discuss language use at length.

**Extract 2 (Galloway et al., 2017)**

MODERATOR: Is everything in English? Are students allowed to use their mother tongue?
SIMON: No, specifically not. We have Koreans etc. They’re not all Japanese, so it’s unfair if they flip into Japanese. Japanese is used sometimes as a lingua franca.
NOBUKO: I have Chinese students, and French students, so they talk to each other in their mother tongue.
SIMON: I try to stop it, because we are trying to create this common bond.
NOBUKO: Actually, students prefer that, according to their comments. They prefer the class to be strictly English when teaching in English.
KUMIKO: I abide by strictly English. If it’s just one or two sentences I don’t actively stop them, but I try to get them back into English speaking.

Extract 3 is an example of silencing. After being interrupted and disagreed with, Zhang did not participate in the discussion further until the next prompt, highlighting the importance of analysing group discussion in focus group analysis, as opposed to simply looking at dominant themes.
Extract 3 (Galloway et al., 2017)

ZHANG: But I think students in the college should have a self-study method, so even if the teacher cannot adapt their methods, the student could help themselves by self-study or other approaches. So I think it’s flexible, we shouldn’t . . .

FAN: I think many students are considering going abroad to further their study, and I think it is actually necessary for teachers to teach courses in English. The students need to be able to speak English.

Focus groups can also reveal how participants reflect on their own beliefs compared to others in the group, as well as how they scaffold each other and draw on each other’s opinions, which often leads to more fully articulated accounts than individual interviews. In extract 4, we see how Ting Ting returns to her point about language training for instructors, prompting Danyi to question their willingness to undergo such training. This promoted Yiling to join the discussion, adding the importance of language training when delivering content through English in EMI settings, which prompted Danyi to reflect on his opinion, considering how, as academics, their lecturers are likely to have published in English. Ting Ting then reflected on her initial opinion that they needed language support and Yiling then agreed, but Danyi and Ting Ting both returned to their initial concerns with the language proficiency of content professors, leading to an extensive discussion on the need for training for both EAP and content professors.

Extract 4: (Galloway et al., 2017)

MODERATOR: Your opinions of other professors in other subjects. Do they need support and training?

YILING: Yes definitely.

TING TING: Language training.

DANYI: To teach something like politics in English, I don’t know how that can be done. Surely their spoken English is not good enough for them to carry out this all English environment. But I don’t know how they can be supported.

TING TING: They can be supported, at least, by English language training.

DANYI: Do you think they are willing to do that?

YILING: They have to, if they have to teach Commerce or Business in English.

DANYI: They have published articles in English in international journals.

TING TING: I don’t think they have the confidence to teach in English.

YILING: It’s quite different, if you are asked to teach Business English and you are confident in your English skills, it’s not a business major, right.

TING TING: Yes, that would be a challenge to us, to teach a special knowledge subject.

YILING: For some of those professors I think it would be a great challenge.

DANYI: Their English is not good enough.

TING TING: So they don’t want to present themselves in English. They would have to be happy to do so, not everyone is qualified to do that, or confident about their English.

Spontaneous responses

Focus groups can also offer an environment conducive to spontaneous responses. They can enable participants to guide the research and pose interesting questions to each other that are not generated by the researcher. In Galloway (2011, 2017), when discussing their attitudes...
towards the English language, participants took the discussion in an unexpected direction, outlining their concerns about the use of Japanese and the possible negative influence of the global spread of English on the Japanese language and culture. They also discussed their concerns with the introduction of English in elementary schools. This unanticipated finding led to further analysis of the topic in an article on standard language ideology and concerns about the use of Japanese, or *kotoba no midare* (disorder in the language) and the possible negative influence on the Japanese language and culture (Galloway, 2014).

**Access to both emic and etic data**

By providing access to the interactional aspects of how people discuss a topic or situation, focus groups can be said to be both naturalistic (involving naturally occurring communication and social interaction) and also researcher imposed data (involving collected in a lab setting or similar setting). Thus, they are useful when the aim is not only to gain insights into a topic, as participants share stories and disclose information, but also to observe group discourse, people’s thought processes as they naturally occur and the language they use in their daily lives. The aim is to “gain immersion into people’s lives. In that sense, focus groups hold the unique position of approximating an understanding of communication in vivo, but in a laboratory setting” (Davis, 2017, p. 2) and are of use to those who want to ‘enter the world’ (see Li Wei, this volume) of their participants.

**Equalizes voice/power**

Focus groups can be useful for reducing power and control as well as reducing the chance of the researcher imposing his/her own agenda. Thus, in studies where researcher positionality is a concern, and where researchers wish to equalise the voice and power balance between the researcher and those being researched, they can provide a less threatening environment. Many applied linguistics researchers conduct international research; this method “may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily, and which provides collective power to marginalised people” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. x). Hiring a moderator from the same population as the participants can also address this power imbalance. For those aiming to gain an in-depth insight into how people think or feel, as well as those working from ‘power sensitive’ theoretical perspectives such as feminism and postmodernism (Liamputtong, 2011), reduced researcher control and opportunity to give voice to the participants may be beneficial.

**Flexibility**

Focus groups can be used in various ways. As primary tools they are mostly used in phenomenological research that aims to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ attitudes or opinions about a situation or topic. They can be useful preliminary tools for exploring a new area and can be used to provide initial preliminary or exploratory insights to generate a hypothesis before developing research design or survey questions. In my own work on EMI, a field where provision is rapidly outpacing empirical research, focus groups were used to gather in-depth insights from key stakeholders (Galloway et al., 2017; Rose & Galloway, 2019) as part of a needs analysis to inform programme administrators and curriculum planning and evaluation. Rose and Galloway (2019) facilitated theory development with regards to both the relevance of Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) for pre- and in-service TESOL practitioners’ own familiar teaching and learning contexts, and the feasibility of implementing
some of the proposals for change to the TESOL curriculum being put forward in the literature. The discussions provided valuable insights on the nature of different TESOL contexts.

Focus groups can also be used as a follow up/confirmatory tool. For example, researchers may wish to use focus groups to confirm the results of quantitative studies and/or explore the topic being investigated in more depth. They can also be used as part of a mixed methods approach to facilitate saturation and triangulation (my intention in Galloway, 2011, 2017). For ethnographers and those doing case study research, focus groups can help provide further insights over other methods such as participant observation and document analysis. They can also facilitate member checking.

Considerations
When considering adopting focus groups, it is important to consider the aims of the project, the type of data or output required, and other practical issues (Wilkinson, 1998).

Aims of the study
Holding a focus group is a sensible choice when the goal is to examine people’s opinions, attitudes or feelings about a particular issue, policy, programme or idea or issue. As noted, they can be of use for those researching new or under-researched areas or provide insights into complicated topics, such as the complex process of curriculum innovation (as in Rose & Galloway, 2019), or to investigate differences in perspectives between groups (e.g. on EMI programmes in Galloway et al., 2017 and Rose & Galloway, 2019). They can also pilot test ideas, inform a large-scale quantitative study, or further explore quantitative findings and enable the examination of how views and ideas are explored in social settings. They are not of use, however, when the aim is to get people to come to a consensus or to test knowledge, or when quantitative data are required for generalisation. It is also important to point out that focus groups are inherently biased, and they allow the researcher to observe how that bias is constructed in the interaction – meaning that they are not representative of the wider population (Ho, 2006). Further, while they can be used to examine individual responses, if single responses are desired, then an interview may be a better choice.

Data
Focus groups generate various types of data, including audio tapes, video recordings, moderator notes and lengthy transcripts of the discussion. If time is an issue, then a lengthy transcription process may be challenging or may influence the type of transcription, which includes note-based analysis, memory-based analysis and transcribing verbatim. Many researchers also examine non-verbal communication; there are various transcription protocols available to consult. To put simply, focus groups can generate a large amount of data: if word count or time is a concern, then this may be something to consider. Further, despite there being a plentiful literature and “extensive advice on how to conduct focus groups, there is relatively little in the focus group literature on how to analyze the resulting data” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 182).

More complex transcription protocols will be needed for those interested in examining language in use or how – not what – things are said in the focus group. Conversation analysis methodology (see Prior & Talmy, this volume) can be applied to focus group transcripts to examine the interactional details of the conversation. Thus, for applied linguistics researchers
investigating language and social interaction, focus groups can provide a means for conversation analysts to understand how participants talk about a situation or a topic, examining turn-taking, turn design and allocation, and responses to previous utterances.

For researchers interested in examining the main issues in the discussion, the constant-comparison analysis can be useful, particularly when multiple focus groups are employed to assist data saturation and also theoretical saturation. There are numerous qualitative analysis software packages, such as NVivo, which can also aid in the analysis of key words and how they are used together (i.e. collocate), as well as generating codes to help towards the creation of themes for within-group and across-group analysis.

Counting frequencies is a controversial topic regarding qualitative data, and particularly with focus group data, as is the use of either numbers or words (e.g. whether we should report say “four out of five had the same view” or “the majority had the same view”). On the one hand, it could be argued that this approach goes against the nature of qualitative research approaches, while on the other hand, it could be argued that some initial quantification is both acceptable and desirable to gain a sense of the data. As Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran (2009) argue, “the inclusion of frequency data helps the researcher to disaggregate focus group data, which is consistent with the qualitative researcher’s notion of treating each focus group member as a unique and important study participant” (p. 9). Maxwell (2005) adds that “Quasi-statistics . . . enable you to assess the amount of evidence in your data” (p. 113, emphasis in original).

In my own work, initial quantification of the data was found to be a useful first step to give an initial impression of dominant themes and to show consensus, agreement, and disagreement, revealing themes that were present in certain groups or mentioned by a certain participant. However, this was then supported with illustrative extracts of group dynamics. I was careful to ensure that this reporting of the themes was not misleading: I examined the views of dissenters, or quieter members, and ensured the analysis was not swayed by dominant members. For this purpose, I created detailed coding frequency tables that included group and individual responses; every effort was made to examine the interactive nature of the discussion and avoid presenting the data like one-to-one interview data. Thus, while analysis should certainly focus on the interaction and the shared construction of meaning as opposed to measurement, content analysis can be a useful way to aid in the systematic analysis of data.

Practicalities

Focus group researchers encounter the same practical issues as other researchers, yet there are some issues that are specific to focus groups. As noted, recruitment can be an issue. Hiring a moderator also requires having detailed training guidelines, and in my case, the guidelines had to be translated into Japanese (Galloway, 2011, 2017) and required a pilot training session to ensure the moderator understood how to deal with dominant voices and other issues, such as maintaining enough control, but not dominating the conversation. Over-dominant and talkative participants can influence the group (for example, making less confident participants reluctant to speak), and the moderator needs to be able to deal with this. This power imbalance may also influence the data, as some participants conceal their opinions (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Other ethical issues relate to confidentiality. It is important that consent forms outline that group discussions are private and all identities are protected, particularly given that video is often used.

Many applied linguistics researchers are also conducting research in varied linguistic and cultural contexts. Some researchers may be unsure of this method in contexts that value turn-taking strategies or value the group over the individual, and those where more passive participation in discussions is the norm. Lee and Lee (2009) compared focus groups with participants
in the Netherlands with those in South Korea, finding that the latter displayed “passive participation, poor and insufficient interactions” (p. 17). Of course, this will also vary according to the participants, but it is important to be mindful of the context within which we are working. ‘Group thinking’ has the possibility to hinder the disclosure of internalised opinions (Stewart & Prem, 1990); in my own research, I used warm-up activities and nominal group technique (NGT) (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993), giving participants a short time to read and note down their responses because turn-taking strategies and the avoidance of interrupting a conversation are commonly employed in the context within which I was working in. It is also important to point out that in this study (Galloway, 2011, 2017), the focus groups revealed that participants were often reluctant to offer strong opinions in the context of the group discussion, unlike their individual interviews. Despite having relatively strong affiliations to particular varieties of English in the interviews, often discussing them extensively, many focus group participants were reluctant to offer such strong opinions regarding English speakers (extracts 5 and 6).

**Extract 5: (Galloway, 2011)**

YUKA: I have never cared about it, so I don’t know.

YUKO: If you don’t care, which means you prefer American accent.

YUKA: Yeah, maybe that’s true. I think English which I can hear from CD with textbook is English for me. That’s my image from the past.

YUKO: Hum::, now I prefer the English from TOEIC lately.

MODERATOR: . . .

MIYUKI: Yeah, they have around four different accents in the test, oh sorry.

**Extract 6: (Galloway, 2011)**

MOEMI: I don’t know which accent is good (##).

YURINO: I think if we were British, (1) we would prefer British English, and if we were American, we would prefer American English (##). I don’t think their accents become the same.

Krueger and Casey (2014) add that when conducting international and cross-cultural focus groups, hiring a moderator from the same ethnic group and with characteristics similar to the participants is important. Those collecting data in different linguistic and cultural contexts to their own may feel like ‘outsiders’ and recruiting an external moderator may be preferred. This can also be helpful in classroom-based research studies where the blurred line between ‘teacher’ and ‘researcher’ may lead to social desirability (or prestige) bias (see Galloway, 2017b). However, clear moderator guidelines and some extensive training may be required, particularly when recruiting a moderator from the student cohort. Krueger and Casey (2014) also suggest getting local advice, being aware of recent events or traditions that may influence the study, the role of rituals and traditions (e.g. who is present during discussions, who is entitled to talk, who is entitled to ask questions, protocol for asking questions), using the local language and being less concerned about time in cultures where this may differ. When conducting focus groups in the Japanese context, hiring an external moderator enabled the discussions to take place entirely in Japanese. However, in this context, the prevalence of group thinking, where the ‘group’ is valued over the individual, led to concerns over participants’ willingness to disclose personal opinions. The nominal group technique (Albrecht et al., 1993), giving students a short time to read the prompts and note down their thoughts before voicing their opinion, was employed here.
Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of focus group research and its potential for research in applied linguistics. To date, the contribution of focus group research in this field has been small, yet this method offers numerous benefits to the applied linguistics researcher. Focus groups enable researchers to collect data from multiple people simultaneously. Their distinctive feature is the group interaction data that can be generated, enabling the researcher to explore insights that would otherwise be unobtainable. In my own experience, I found the methodological scope of previous studies investigating English language attitudes to be rather narrow, and focus groups enabled the exploration of this phenomenon in greater depth. In the field of applied linguistics, we have witnessed a greater methodological openness for qualitative methods over the years and it is hoped that future research will draw on the strengths of this data collection tool that can be applied in a variety of research designs and for a variety of purposes.

References


