



Focus Groups: an effective means of gaining course feedback?

Clyde Fowle recounts some of the uses of focus groups.

Focus groups are a relatively new and under-utilised research tool in language programme evaluation. However, in my experience, developing a model of corporate language programme evaluation at Ericsson Telecommunications, I found them extremely useful for gaining student feedback which allowed me to gain fresh insights into the participants' level of satisfaction in the programme. I used focus groups as a method of data collection because they allow participants to express their opinions relatively freely without a high degree of interference from the interviewer. Vaughn et al. (1996 p.16.) state "...the focus group interview is a research tool that is highly consistent with current trends in education and psychology that aim at understanding more about what stakeholders think and feel." The ethos behind focus groups also seems more 'democratic' than other methods of data collection; making it a suitable method to use in the stakeholder model of evaluation I was developing.

When I used Focus Groups

Focus groups were used post-course with students and teachers as I hoped that they would give a clearer understanding of the learners' and teachers' perceptions of the course and perhaps allow these important groups of stakeholders to suggest solutions to

problems that had arisen or at least become more aware of the differing expectations that the various stakeholders had of the course. Bangrura (1994) argues that in a faculty evaluation, using data generated by student focus groups, the researchers were able to gain a understanding of important constructs that would have been difficult to operationalise in a conventional survey such as the importance of the "classroom culture" for students.

I used focus groups at the end of the programme so that areas of concern highlighted in the mid-course survey could be explored in more depth. I also felt that areas that may not have been fully covered in the survey could be developed further. I also thought that having finished a programme of study the learners and teachers would

A focus group allows data to be collected from a reasonably large number of participants relatively economically

be in a more informed position to draw conclusions and make judgements about the programme. Students were motivated to be involved in the focus group as although the current course of study had finished the programme as a whole would continue the following year. It would seem from the literature that a focus group at the end of a programme is the most suitable time to assess satisfaction levels. Kreuger (p.25) states "...focus groups can be helpful after a program or experience has been conducted. This might occur in assessments of programs, summative evaluations or program post-mortems to discover what went wrong."

Reasons for using them

The focus group allows data to be collected from a reasonably large number of participants relatively economically if compared with individual interviews. It is also maintained in the literature that the group dynamics provide a suitable environment for individuals to both form and express their opinions on the subject. It is thus the moderator's job to ensure that the discussion is focused on the topic in hand and that all participants are given the chance to express themselves. Vaughn (1996) believes that the group has a "loosening effect" on the individuals that enhances them to express their opinions. Day (1995, p.5) also states, "The student focus group session is more like the

My experience supports the idea presented in the literature that focus groups enable participants to form and develop their opinions together and are a constructive channel for feedback on a programme.

flow of a conversation class than the quizzing of a group of individuals."

Focus groups may have a wider impact; Harris (1996, p.115) suggests that focus groups "can cultivate a creative approach to understanding customers." This may be a two way process helping customers understand our intentions and enhancing the relationship we have with them.

Focus Groups in ELT Evaluations

There is little in the literature about focus groups in the evaluation of language programmes, and that which does exist seems, on the whole, to have been carried out on a more ad hoc basis to gain a general impression of a programme or institution. Anderson (1996) outlines the use of focus groups in the FIRST audit of language schools and within Eurocentres to gauge satisfaction levels amongst learners. The results of which seem promising, and he concludes (p.18) "Focus groups are but one of several ways of collecting feedback but they offer a very flexible and efficient way of sampling student opinion." Focus groups seem favourable in circumstances of financial constraints where evaluations aim to identify general levels of satisfaction and student concerns.

Considerations

One problem that can occur in small-scale evaluations, particularly of corporate programmes is that relationships that the participants have, both inside and outside the classroom, might have an effect on the discussion. It is therefore necessary to ensure, as far as possible, that the participants are homogeneous in terms of position in

the company and that there is a mix of learners from the different groups. Another consideration is that of linguistic ability, with monolingual groups it is a good idea to have an assistant moderator who is a speaker of the mother tongue of the group. It is also advisable, with the participants' consent, to record the session for later analysis.

Conducting the focus groups

Each group of learners was asked to identify three members who would be willing to represent them in the focus group interview. The three classes involved were elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate level. They were aware that the meeting would be a forum to discuss their English language programme so all members of the class could express their opinions to their representatives prior to the meeting. The meeting took place in the week following the completion of the courses. In an attempt to make the atmosphere different from the learning context light refreshments were provided. The moderator prepared general questions relating to various aspects of the course to guide the interview.

At the beginning of the meeting the aims of the session were outlined to the group and they were told that individuals could contribute in either English or Thai. They agreed to allow the session to be recorded. During the session the moderator guided the discussion but allowed the participants to develop ideas and discuss their feelings towards the course. Most of the discussion took place in English; when Thai was used stronger members of the group usually summarised the main points

in English. The meeting lasted approximately one hour. The participants expressed that they appreciated the opportunity to air and exchange opinions.

The teachers' meeting was very informal with the three teachers discussing their feelings toward the course with the moderator, who guided the discussion. The teachers also felt that sharing ideas, opinions and experiences of the courses was a valuable means of ensuring that future courses within the programme would be improved. It also allowed teachers to establish common points of concern about areas of the programme that they felt needed addressing.

My findings

The focus group interviews were very encouraging, and allowed ideas to be developed amongst the group and, therefore, gave clearer information about general trends of opinion than the previous questionnaires had done. My experience supports the idea presented in the literature that focus groups enable participants to form and develop their opinions together and are a constructive channel for feedback on a programme. For example, the problematic issue of the timing of classes was quickly resolved in the focus group as when those concerned about the current timing expressed this, suggestions were made for other times and a consensus was soon reached. However, in the previous questionnaires the issue had been raised by several students, but nothing had been done about it other than acknowledging the problem as there had been no consensus. The focus group allowed the students to share their experiences with those in other classes at different levels, which I felt was very positive, as most of the

focus groups

As focus groups only consist of a small number of participants, it is important to try to ensure that they are representative of the population that you are wishing to study.

discussion relating to the teaching and materials was supportive and constructive.

The students requested copies of cassettes both in the questionnaires and the focus group, but the focus group allowed the problem to be clarified. It transpired that the other schools teaching in the company gave students tapes. I was able to explain to the students that we were not in favour of this as it would breach copyright, and it may mean students would listen to the exercises before class which would not necessarily be useful. However, later in the focus group when students were asked to make recommendations for future courses self-access listening was discussed and the students seemed keen to have this option. The focus group also allowed sensitive areas such as lateness and absenteeism to be discussed and it was pleasing to note that many of the learners were also concerned about this.

It was interesting to see that the teachers were less positive about the programme in their focus group than they had been in the questionnaires. Although they were still generally happy teaching at Ericsson, they expressed concerns over student attendance and the level of progress made during the programme. They seemed to be disappointed in the progress and commitment made by the students. It appeared although students were still enjoying classes; they were not taking enough responsibility for their learning. This may very well be an example of a mismatch of expectations that different stakeholders have about such a programme. The matter was thus brought up in subsequent discussions with the training manager.

The focus groups provided very good opportunities to gauge opinions and

also acted as a testing ground where those involved could discuss ideas with their peers. One problem, particularly with the students, was they were not really able to come up with original ideas or suggestions for improving the programme. However, I found that when various alternatives were suggested the ensuing discussion soon developed in such a way that the popular and unpopular alternatives were clearly identified. This might suggest that we can use focus groups as a testing ground for new ideas relating to programmes and they may, therefore, act as a forum where ideas can be discussed in order to get a feeling of opinion relating to a topic. The results from the focus groups were much clearer and more utilisable than those obtained from the questionnaires.

Concerns about Focus Groups

One person dominates the discussion

Many people are sceptical about focus groups fearing that persuasive and articulate members of the group will dominate the discussion. However, strongly opinionated and assertive people tend to cause others to react and in fact stimulate useful discussion of the issues in hand. It is also the researchers' responsibility to try to prevent one person negatively affecting the interview. The moderator should direct the discussion suitably and the person responsible for analysing the raw data must summarise it in a way that reflects the groups' feelings both in areas of consensus and those of contention.

The role of the moderator is highly skilled

It is true that the moderator has a very important role that requires

particular skills (commercial moderators are highly paid). However, many of the skills parallel those of language teachers: formulating questions, setting up discussions, managing group dynamics etc. It is important, however, that moderators understand their role and the methodology that they are using; both Krueger and Vaughn provide clear and useful guidelines for moderators and are well worth reading before conducting interviews.

The group sample may be biased

As focus groups only consist of a small number of participants it is important to try to ensure that they are representative of the population that you are wishing to study. In commercial research this is done by selective sampling and payment of the participants. We should attempt to pay attention to factors such as: nationality, age, gender, linguistic level, programme of study, length of study etc. depending on our context, to ensure that the groups are representative. In corporate settings, such as that outlined above, it is necessary to ensure that those included in the group are of a similar hierarchical level in the company to avoid participants being inhibited from expressing themselves freely.

Linguistic limitations may restrict discussion

Obviously language learners will be restricted in their ability to fully express themselves if the discussion is carried out in English. In multilingual groups this may be difficult to overcome; one possibility is including two speakers of each language so that they can confer and support each other. In monolingual groups it is possible to hold the discussion in the group's mother tongue or, as I did, in English but with an assistant moderator who speaks the language of the group to

help guide the discussion and assist in analysis if the discussion takes place in both languages. As our clients are not native speakers we should accept that this may place some limitations on their ability to express themselves articulately in English. However, participating in such meaningful discussion often greatly boosts their confidence in using the language and if an issue is important to an individual they will usually find the means to express themselves somehow!

Hard / objective data is hard to obtain

It is true that focus groups do not provide quantitative data. However, they are but one research tool available to us. If we are primarily interested in probing areas such as expectations, dissatisfaction and feelings then the data that they provide is often far more enlightening than that gained from other methods such as questionnaires. They allow us to identify trends and perceptions that are utilisable in policy making. To increase validity interviews should be recorded so that the results after analysis more accurately represent the actual discussion that occurred. For important areas it is also a good idea to carry out more than one focus group interview, or another means of data collection, in order to verify the findings.

Conclusions

Focus groups should be explored as an efficient method of obtaining data as they allow the researcher to gauge

Focus groups can act as a forum where participants are more likely to reach a consensus on problematic issues, or at least become more aware of areas of concern.

opinions of participants and stakeholders in a programme. They also act as a forum where participants are more likely to reach a consensus on problematic issues, or at least become more aware of areas of concern.

I feel that much more research could be done into the role of focus groups in gaining feedback on language programmes. It would be interesting to conduct focus group interviews at different stages of the programme and compare the results. I also feel that there is great scope for using focus groups to gauge students' aims in pre-course needs-analysis. Similarly, it would be of use to discover to what extent the results of the interviews are dependent on those in the group.

References

- Anderson, I. (1996), "Focus groups as a means of obtaining student feedback", *ELT Management Newsletter*, 20:16-18, IATEFL.
- Bangura, A. (1994), The focus group approach as an alternative for collecting faculty evaluation data to improve teaching. Paper presented at the Centre for Educational Development and Assessment Conference on Faculty Evaluation.
- Day, J. (1995), "Student focus groups and the assessment of quality", *ELT Management Newsletter*, 18:4-5, IATEFL.
- Harris, E. (1996), *Customer Service: a Practical Approach*. Prentice-Hall.
- Krueger, R. (1994), *Focus Groups: a Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Sage Publications.
- Vaughn, S., J. Schumm, and J. Sinagub. (1996), *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology*. Sage Publications.

Clyde Fowle is Director of Studies of The ACS-Bell Language Centre, Thailand. His Master's research focused on stakeholder programme evaluation utilising focus group research.

Errata

In the last issue of the Newsletter, John Walker's article should have been entitled Service Quality: perspectives on service in ELT operations.

Denis the Exiguous was described as alive in the sixteenth century when in fact he lived in the sixth century.

Apologies to John and Denis.

Would you like to write an article or book review for your Newsletter?

If you would like to discuss a topic that interests you, please contact the editor. We need your contributions to keep everyone informed of management developments.

Would you like to advertise in a Newsletter that is read by decision makers?

If you want to advertise a book, a course or a management position, please contact us.

Full Page: £150
Half Page: £100
Quarter Page: £80