THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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This paper explores the possibility of expanding the focus group interview into the field of English as a Second Language (ESL), where this research methodology is yet to be thoroughly explored. Specifically, it aims to challenge popular criticisms about the reliability and validity of the focus group as a qualitative research methodology. It does this by first setting up a list of five main criticisms of the focus group interview drawn from current literature on research methodology within the social sciences and education. Based on transcripts of interactional data gathered from focus group interviews carried out among ESL students in a formal ESL context, it then provides a direct and detailed response to each criticism. The arguments put forward demonstrate that the focus group interview, as a method of data collection, may be particularly relevant in gathering the viewpoints and opinions of participants who have traditionally not been well represented through the more conventional and common methods currently employed in ESL research studies. Furthermore, the paper raises conscious awareness about the potential of the focus group as a viable and verifiable tool in qualitative research methodology.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the focus group interview as a research method can be traced back to when I was investigating adolescent students' beliefs, perceptions and viewpoints about prevalent institutional sociocultural norms in the learning of English as a Second Language (henceforth ESL) as suggested in various classroom studies (Baetens-Beardsmore 1995; Cheah 1998; Ellis 1992; Gorsuch 2000; Heslep 2001; Kramsch 1998; Williams 2001). Based on the increasingly successful use of the focus group interview as a method of data collection in the social sciences (Bellenger et al. 1976; Goldman and MacDonald 1987; Greenbaum 1993) I thought that this form of group interview, as opposed to individual

interviews, could encourage students to open up and talk freely about what they do in their language classrooms in interactive groups. I felt that in my study the focus group interview could be an appropriate research tool for data collection since young children and adolescents tend to self-disclose spontaneously (Krueger and Casey 2000, 8) with the ability to tell remarkably consistent 'stories' about life in certain situations (Green and Hart 1999, 21). Furthermore, the synergistic effect of the focus group can help to produce data or ideas less forthcoming from a one-on-one interview (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). The students in the focus group interviews that I carried out were adolescent learners at the secondary school level between the ages of 11 and 15 who had been schoolmates if not classmates for at least a year and thus knew one another quite well.[1]

Amidst its growing popularity in the fields of social sciences and education, questions have been raised on and actively debated over the validity and reliability of the focus group interview as a research tool (Agar and MacDonald 1995; Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Janis 1982; Krueger and Casey 2000; Sussman et al. 1991). This article is concerned with a discussion of the focus group interview as a research design in formal ESL studies. Specifically, it is a response to reservations voiced over the robustness of the focus group interview as a research method, with references made to the focus group interviews I carried out with my secondary school students in an attempt to gain their views and perceptions about the impact of the school sociocultural norms of ESL learning on their classroom practices. The first section of this paper describes the general historical background of focus groups as a methodology. This is followed by an annotated summary of the criticisms made of focus group interviews. A brief account of the methodology employed in my own research study is then provided, which leads to a detailed response to each criticism supported wherever possible by my own experience as a researcher using such interviews.

FOCUS GROUPS FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From writings and research studies on the topic (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Litosseliti 2003; Krueger and Casey 2000; Morgan 1997) it is possible to establish a working definition of what constitutes a focus group as a group interview without the alternate question-answer sequence found in typical interview sessions. The hallmark of focus group interviews is the explicit use of group interaction as data to explore insights that would otherwise remain hidden. Typically, groups of between five and ten people gather together to voice their opinions and perceptions about a study topic in a non-threatening

and comfortable environment. Interaction is based on a carefully planned series of discussion topics set up by the researcher who also acts as a moderator during the group interaction (Green and Hart 1999; Litosseliti 2003). Participants are encouraged to talk to one another, ask questions, exchange anecdotes and comment on one another's experiences and points of view. Although the researcher as moderator initiates the topics for discussion and thus exercises a certain control over what is to be discussed, s/he does not offer any viewpoints during the talk-in-process session.

Since the 1980s, the focus group interview as a form of research method has been used increasingly in qualitative research in various disciplines within the social sciences (Hammersley and Woods 1984; Hargreaves 1967; Willis 1977). A review of on-line databases and social sciences academic journals shows a steady use of focus groups as a research tool (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Morgan 1997). Furthermore, social scientists have started borrowing and adapting from the established set of practices in market research to fit their own research purposes (Krueger 1994; Morgan 1993; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Vaughn et al. 1996). Thus, in the social sciences, focus group methodology has undergone considerable innovation. Research studies in language classrooms, however, have tended to lean heavily towards the quantitative paradigm (Lazaraton 2000; Seedhouse 2005). Thus, the impact of the focus group interview as a research tool in the field of language education is yet to be discussed or explored in greater depth.

CRITICISMS OF FOCUS GROUPS AS A QUALITATIVE METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

As with many other emerging qualitative research methods, focus groups have come under intense scrutiny, with questions raised over their validity and reliability as far as data collection is concerned both in terms of procedure and the data itself. From writings, discussions and research studies on the subject, it is possible to list an annotated summary of criticisms highlighting the main areas of contention and debate:

1. It is doubtful if all participants will be highly involved with the topic, therefore not all the participants' viewpoints will be heard (Kitzinger 1994a; Morgan 1997).
2. Findings may come from subjective opinions, particularly from the researcher who might not be neutral in reporting the data (Krueger and Casey 2000; Morgan 1997).
3. Focus groups may not be scientific enough as a research method (Krueger and Casey 2000; Litosseliti 2003).

4. Focus groups may be unnatural because discussions are controlled to a large extent by the researcher (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Litosseliti 2003).
5. Group discussions may not give an in-depth understanding of an individual's opinions or experiences (Kitzinger 1994b; Michell 1999; Morgan 1996).

These criticisms form the main questions and uncertainties raised about the focus group interview as a qualitative research tool. This paper seeks to provide a direct response to these criticisms based on my experience in focus group interviews with adolescent ESL students.

THE STUDY

The focus group interview was one of the sources of data collection in my research study which took place in an English medium secondary school in Brunei. In this school, English is the medium of instruction for about 80% of the subjects offered. The aim of the interview was to gather the viewpoints and opinions of students about the learning of ESL in their classrooms in particular and in the school in general. Specifically, I was interested in finding out their viewpoints, beliefs and perceptions about the impact of the school's particular operating institutional norms on classroom talk. I felt that the focus group interview could provide opportunities for students to share freely their viewpoints on the complex issue of classroom verbal behaviour.

The focus group interviews carried out in my study are influenced by Green and Hart (1999) in terms of group set-up and analysis procedure. In their research on exploring children's beliefs and perceptions about accidents and accident prevention in the U.K., they set up small group interviews (5 or 6 in a group) with 7 to 11 year-old children in their school settings, audio taped the interviews and then subjected the transcribed data to qualitative analysis. In my study, the student participants were aged between 13 and 15 and they came from different ESL classes. Many were schoolmates if not classmates for at least a year or more before the interviews were conducted and therefore knew one another quite well. The groups differed in terms of age, academic performance and home backgrounds (predominantly Malay and Chinese-speaking home environments). Three focus group interviews were conducted altogether during the fourth, fifth and sixth week of the research period with five participants in each group from the same school year. Some were volunteers while others were selected by their English teachers based on their gregarious personalities.

Permission was obtained from the teachers to hold the interviews during one of their English lessons. Each interview lasted between forty and seventy-five minutes and was held in the research and resource room in the school. Prior to the interviews, I met with each group of students and briefed them on the nature of the interview and its general purpose, explaining that they were free to talk and ask questions if they did not understand some of the issues under discussion. Although they had no prior experience in this kind of group interview, they were very enthusiastic and spontaneous and all readily agreed to be videotaped.

Group interaction was based on a list of topic questions pertaining to the main influencing factors in institutional ESL learning norms (see Table 1). As English is quite well established in the school lives of these students, it was decided that the interviews would be conducted in English.

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1. What do you do in your English class?
   (P) Which part of your English learning do you like/ dislike most? Why?
2. What do you think of the English exams/ assessments?
   (P) Do exams really help you improve your English? In what ways are they helpful/ not helpful?
3. Do you think the English you learn in school will help you when you go out to work?
   (P) In what ways will it help/ hinder?
4. What kind of behaviour does your English teacher expect from you in class?
   (P) Do you agree with her/ him? What kind of teachers would you like to have as your English teacher?

P = Prompts

Table 1 Suggested topics for the student focus group interviews

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These suggested topics did not run in any sequential order. Nor were the questions explicitly asked as sometimes the interaction flowed naturally from one topic to another. The prompts (P) were added to provide focus to the topic under discussion.

Audiotapes of the discussions were transcribed as fully as possible.[2] The data was arranged in such a way that the transcript reads like a narrative in order to gain a better sense of what was being said from the students' viewpoint. In addition, the interviews were videotaped to include non-verbal linguistic behaviour. In the next section, the data collected is referred to in the light of the criticisms presented above.

A RESPONSE TO THE CRITICISMS OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

CRITICISM 1. IT IS DOUBTFUL IF ALL PARTICIPANTS WILL BE HIGHLY INVOLVED WITH THE TOPIC.

The participation level of the student focus group interviews conducted in my study was generally quite high. Students were spontaneous and candid in their viewpoints and opinions, particularly those in the younger age group, suggesting that perhaps, young adolescents, like children, 'have a natural tendency to disclose things about themselves' (Krueger and Casey 2000, 8). On the whole, students appeared eager to self-disclose and were quite open in their comments. While some studies have found that subjects may deliberately withdraw from participation (e.g. in Michell 1999) longitudinal study on the issue of teenage lifestyles), in my study there was little evidence of such deliberate withdrawal from participation by any of the students. Instead, it was more the dominant students taking on the tacitly agreed role of spokespeople on behalf of the rest. Extract 1 shows one such instance, with one student (S1) commenting on how her friends would react to mistakes in her spoken English.

EXTRACT 1

> S1. because when we make mistakes our friends won't... they won't do anything. so we just-
>
> S2. -we just-
>
> S1. -talk-
>
> Ss. -yes (nod in agreement)
>
> S1. yes. sometimes we...
>
> M. what's the difference between talking in the classroom and outside it?
>
> S3. well there's a difference. the teacher's inside the classroom-
>
> Ss. -yeah (laugh)
>
> S2. and outside the students feel like they're free. they feel like they're not caged up with the teacher and must be doing all the things that the teacher tells us

Ss. (nod in agreement)

As the sharing progressed, it became clear that the teacher's authority was such that it made the students feel very self-conscious when using English in the classroom. Although it is quite clear that students S1, S2 and S3 are the dominant speakers, the rest of the group appears to be very much involved in the discussion, judging by their choral assents: 'yah' and 'yes' to comments from the three main speakers. The video clips also show all the participants nodding their heads and laughing, an indication that they were following the discussion actively throughout. Therefore, it is difficult to gauge to what extent non-participation of some group members could lead to data not being representative of the whole, as these students were clearly not passive despite their minimal output, thus disproving the claim by Morgan (1997) that uneven distribution of contributions by participants in such interviews can lead to the data being unrepresentative. Moreover, it is not the case that the quieter students acquiesced simply because they felt compelled to, since there were frequent instances in the transcripts where they showed their disagreement quite vehemently. Extract 2 is a case in point: here the topic is about differences between the English language used inside and outside the classroom.

EXTRACT 2

Ss. no! [to using classroom English when talking to friends]

S1. we use slang

Ss. not really

S2. if you talk to the teacher, no-

S4. -only if we talk among ourselves

Ss. yah!

When asked if they speak to their friends in classroom English, the vehement choral answer was 'no!'. When student S1 said that they use slang, all four others quickly corrected him by saying 'not really' and then waited for the more outspoken ones, S2 and S4, to clarify what 'not really' meant, that is, that they did not use slang when talking to their teacher but only among themselves. As the extract shows, even the quieter students showed their opinions through non-verbal means, such as by nodding their heads in agreement or by giving monosyllabic responses 'yes' and 'no'. Thus, it appears that the supposedly passive students had a lot to say but were too shy to speak up. The impression

gathered from the video clips is that they are not very confident with expressing themselves in English, therefore they rely upon the more articulate speakers to convey their viewpoints. This might be a useful point to consider when conducting focus group interviews, particularly with people who are interacting in a second language.

CRITICISM 2. FINDINGS MAY RESULT FROM SUBJECTIVE OPINIONS AND THEREFORE MAY NOT BE REPRESENTATIVE OR APPLICABLE TO ALL.

Unfortunately, research neutrality may be a real issue, more so in focus groups than in other forms of interviews, as many focus group moderators may already have quite intimate knowledge of the subject under study and thus may come to the interviews with fairly established perceptions and attitudes (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Certainly, in my study, I often found myself struggling with particular topics under discussion, especially when students' viewpoints did not appear to match those that I believed to be true. Extract 3 is one example of such an instance.

EXTRACT 3

M. do you think the English you learn now in school. do you think it will help you when you go out to work?

Ss. yes

M. to what extent do you think it helps you? Bearing in mind what you're learning in the classroom now. does it really help?

S4. what we've been learning in the classroom is. we're talking like this because we learnt it ever since we're young. so when we go out we're using actually all this knowledge which were taught. so without this knowledge I guess we won't be able to communicate

Ss. yeah

S2. especially when you go overseas and you know you get to communicate with other people. and you know. you go there with a different accent and you know…

M. but you do realize that when you go out there. in the real world the way of talking. the language used is very different from what you learn here…

S2. yeah

M. but you still think it's helpful?

Ss. yes

S1. it's helpful…

The topic under discussion was whether the English learnt in school, being a formal code, is relevant to learners when they go out into the real world. The unanimous opinion was yes. For me, the students' viewpoint was unexpected and unacceptable because it differed from mine. As a result, there was an unconscious attempt on my part to persuade the students to change their viewpoint through the insertion of comments and questions such as: 'bearing in mind what you're learning in the classroom now. Does it really help?'; 'but you do realize that when you go out to meet…' and 'but you still think it's helpful?'. It was not until a review of the transcript was carried out that the bias behind all that questioning was revealed. It is interesting however to note that the students did not yield to the pressure put on them to change their viewpoints. The point made here is that since it may be quite difficult to remain detached and objective during such discussions, the researcher should study the transcript carefully with the aim of checking for areas that show the moderator's bias or prejudice within the data presented.

Another observation was that while the data yielded from one topic appeared to vary across the groups of participants, when closely examined such differences were in fact quite superficial. Extracts 4 and 5, taken from two separate student focus groups, provide a case in point. The topic under discussion was group work and what the students thought about group work activities in class.

EXTRACT 4

Ss. no, never, not for us (to group work)

S4. we're noisy. that's why she does it in the science class. they're probably more disciplined than we. we are a big class, so when we get into groups, we become noisy

S3. I think it's useless. I don't think we should have group activities. it's like usually some people, they just group together and chat and talk around

S4. yah. but usually students don't really care

S2. field trips

S3. yah, that'll be interesting

EXTRACT 5

S2. yah, depends on the teacher, but Mrs. M does a lot, you know, after you came, she did quite a lot of um…

S3. interactive

S2. yah, interactive work. so which is good. and I think we should do more… yah, that's right. but we really enjoyed the interactive work she's done so far

S1. about twice a month

S2. yah? but before we've never done this before. it's like… when the first term is ending then she introduced it

S1. yah, but even the year before, we've never done this, so it's like…

S2. everything has been lined up basically, all written work

Ss. yah

In Extract 4 students' viewpoints on interactive and group work activities at first instance appear to be negative: 'no, never, not for us'; 'we're noisy'; 'I think it's useless'; 'students don't usually care'. Their viewpoints contrasted with those found in Extract 5, where responses were generally positive: 'which is good'; 'should do more'; 'really enjoyed the interactive work'. At first glance, it appears that the interviews offered two different group opinions, thus highlighting the problem of general representation of findings, a requirement for valid and reliable study from a quantitative perspective (Krueger and Casey 2000; Litosseliti 2003; Morgan 1997). A closer examination of the data in Extract 4, however, found that basically *both groups* project a common positive attitude towards interactive activities and group work, as revealed by a textual analysis of the data: 'not for us' (Ss); '*we're* noisy… *we* are a *big class… we* become noisy' (S4); '*I don't think we should* have group activities' (S3). From the expressions in italic, it is possible to work out the hidden message behind the data yielded, that what the students in Extract 4 actually mean is not that interactive activities and group work are ineffective, but that such activities were ineffective *for them*.

CRITICISM 3. FOCUS GROUPS MAY NOT BE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.

If scientific here refers to research in the fields of biology and physics where data control, replication and proof of replication are of the utmost importance (Krueger and Casey 2000), then focus groups would fall outside this definition. This is simply because it would be quite difficult to impose certain scientific research criteria when the subjects under study are individual, thinking living beings. This is not to say, however, that focus groups are any less scientific because as an inquiry technique, they are systematic and verifiable. In the first instance, although the researcher has little control over the participants' interaction, s/he has clear control over the topic of discussion, as mentioned above. In my study, such control became very important, particularly when discussions heated up and participants deviated or digressed from the topic. In these situations, discussion would be brought back on track through reiteration of the original question, for example. In one instance, students were asked to talk about what they did in their English classes. They launched into a running commentary of how they loved their English lessons, how relaxing they were, that English came naturally to them and that learning English was not difficult. Upon realising that the question was not really being answered, I repeated it. That brought the students back to direct interaction around the topic, shown in Extract 6.

EXTRACT 6

> S2. honestly speaking it's kind of boring. sometimes you know…
>
> S1. grammar vocab grammar vocab. then comprehension compre compre
>
> S3. we do a lot of written work
>
> Ss. yes
>
> S3. like write write write but she doesn't give like a lot. it's like she spaces it out. a little at a time
>
> S5. but sometimes we write too much
>
> S1. one lesson about 20 sentences

As can be seen from the extract, the interaction directly addressed my question. By repeating the original question, I was able to redirect the participants' focus to discuss what I needed to know. In fact, from the transcript data, it seemed that what they actually

did in their everyday English lesson was quite different from their initial declaration that it was relaxing and good. There did not appear to be any explicit explanation for such mismatch of opinions, although it was noticed that as the interview progressed, students generally appeared to be less self-conscious about what they said. They became more natural in their sharing and more willing to, as Michell (1999) puts it, 'tell it like it is'.

Contrary to questions raised over the robustness of the focus group interview as a research tool (Agar and MacDonald 1995; Kirk and Miller 1986), focus group interviews could prove to be a sound research procedure capable of bringing about systematic analysis. Here, data for analysis arise from the interaction itself. While the data may appear to be overwhelming and messy initially, it is possible to subject it to in-depth analysis. A content analysis of the interactive data on the topic of assessment in my study, for example, yielded a clearer understanding of students' perceptions on language exams and tests in the school. From the analysis emerged a list of most frequent assessment re-lated expressions used across the focus groups, shown in Table 2. Student expressions here are listed in terms of nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. When these expressions are subjected to a frequency count, it is found that the most frequent expressions used by students to talk about the assessment are those that had to do with grades or marks (26%): 'higher grades'; 'good marks'; 'a lot of marks'; while those least used are about the exams being a waste of time or useless (10%): 'a torture'; 'don't get the point'. One could gather from the findings that while students think school assessment is important for promotion purposes and for pleasing their parents, they are less than happy with the way it is designed or constructed. The point being made here is that significant and in-depth findings can result from analysis of data gathered from a focus group interview.

Common Student Expressions on School Language Assessments	Frequency of occurrence in terms of percentages (N=30)
grades/marks	26
waste of time/useless	10
don't get it/ hard/don't understand	17
too many	13
good/like assessments	17
good/helpful	17

Table 2 Frequency of expressions on assessment in student focus group interviews

Indeed, it has been recognised as long ago as the 1980s (van Lier 1988) that quantitative analysis may not be appropriate when it comes to interactional data, which are by nature complex and intricate (Seedhouse 2005). Indeed the danger with quantitative analysis is its tendency to scan quickly the data for categories or constructs of interest to the researcher and then 'move straight to quantification of the results with no emic, case-by-case analysis of the discoursal data' (Seedhouse 2005, 550).

CRITICISM 4. FOCUS GROUPS ARE UNNATURAL.

The unnaturalness of focus group interviews has been discussed quite thoroughly in some writings on the topic (Kitzinger 1994a; Mayall 1993), with questions raised over the artificiality of contexts and naturalness of data. Moreover, the very thought of a lengthy and sustained group discussion focused on one single topic may not be a natural activity.

It is the viewpoint in this paper, however, that the naturalness of focus groups is not only dependent on the degree of familiarity between researcher and participants (the more familiar the researcher is with the participants, the more natural the interaction) or the restricted topic under discussion, but is also determined by the level of formality of the encounter. Certainly, there were a number of unplanned informal encounters with groups of students in my study, such as before school hours or during breaks in partially empty classrooms or the cafeteria. Such encounters often appeared to attract small groups of students who were initially curious about my presence in the school. The interaction would quickly shift to talk about their English classes, what they did everyday, how boring the lessons were and their wish to have more language games. There was a high degree of naturalness in the talk during these informal encounters which undoubtedly helped increase the naturalness of the focus group interviews as well.

The criticism that focus groups are unnatural because talk is restricted to one single topic may be both superficial and misconstrued. Instead, one should consider how a single topic in a group interview is expanded and elaborated upon by the participants without the researcher being seen to artificially sustain it. There were a number of occasions in my study where the students talked at length about a topic without any need for me to sustain the interaction. One such occasion occurred when the topic was class participation and why students generally avoid it. An extract of the data is provided in (7).

> S3. I think they're scared to go up and make a fool of themselves -
>
> S1. so they're saying that, oh maybe they'll laugh at me -
>
> S3. they'll make fun of me for the rest of my life. they'll… something like that. it's not that they really believe that. they just feel scared. you don't just stand up and say "I know the answer"!
>
> S2. maybe they can't handle criticisms that well, sometimes
>
> S4. for me, sometimes I don't answer because I know that someone else is going to stand up to answer
>
> S3. everybody's like that so everybody's just…
>
> S5. I think people here don't dare to answer as much as people elsewhere. don't know. maybe it's human nature. maybe we're Asians

Here, there was no instance of moderator intervention. The single topic about student participation was sustained by the students themselves who offered a number of reasons for non-participation during the talk-in-process: 'scared to go up and make a fool of themselves'; 'can't handle criticisms well'; 'I know someone else is going to stand up to answer'; 'maybe we're Asians'. In this sense, the interaction did not appear to be controlled by me as moderator but to flow naturally from subtopic to subtopic.

CRITICISM 5. FOCUS GROUPS MAY NOT GIVE IN-DEPTH UNDERSTANDING OF THE TOPIC UNDER STUDY.

The idea that focus groups may not give in-depth information about a topic originated mainly from the historical claim of their 'simple convenience' which led to the assumption that nothing substantial could come from so simple a research design (Morgan 1997, 5). Moreover, it has been argued that the loose, free-flowing talk in focus groups tends not to encourage thoughtful opinions and thoughts in the way, for example, individual interviews do (Agar and MacDonald 1995).

Today, as focus groups become more widespread in use and sophisticated in design, it may not be that 'simple, convenient' interview technique that it was once considered. The decision to use focus group interviews in my study was based on pertinent reasons expressed earlier in the paper. I found that with a set of thought-provoking discussion topics, these interviews could be effective without being complicated. The unrehearsed

experiences constructed and re-constructed through the focus group interviews provided clear insights into students' perceptions of formal ESL learning in school, similar to that found in other studies using the same methodology (Kitzinger and Hunt 1993; Miller et al. 1998).

The interactional data from my study supports Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) in that often lying underneath all that seemingly loose and inconsequential talk are issues that bring about new knowledge and data. Although there were occasions of heated discussion, the students' interaction brought forth significant insights into issues that until then had been largely ignored. For example, at one point, talking about teacher authority in the classroom, the topic drifted into a lengthy discussion about student autonomy in school learning. One student said that they should have more say in what they wanted to learn, which led to disagreement from others in the group, as shown in Extract 8:

EXTRACT 8

> S4. I don't think so…
>
> S3. probably they'll say, "o.k. let's go to the library"
>
> S4. the students will probably pick the easiest subjects and they won't pick compre. so we won't have any compre.
>
> S5. we'd have composition everyday
>
> S3. because usually if you let the students decide they have different ideas. probably one will choose one the other will choose another. it's like-
>
> S2. there'll be a riot!
>
> S4. depends on what kinds of responsibilities
>
> S2. I'd think the teacher is timid. she should be strict. she should show discipline

It is quite clear from Extract 8 that these students' perceptions of student-centredness differ quite radically from what we understand it to be from writings on the subject (Kumaravadivelu 1993; Littlewood 1981; Nunan 1987). More importantly, these perceptions would not have been revealed without such interactional data. Indeed, the rev-

elations arising from group interviews seek to challenge traditional assumptions maintained in writings about ESL learning, that perhaps what is perceived to be good for students may not be consistent with what they as actual learners believe it to be. New data and insights gained from focus groups may thus seek to challenge more or less accepted assumptions about certain pedagogical practices (Johnson 1996).

CONCLUSION

While it is not the intention of this paper to prove the superiority of the focus group interview over other research methods, it seeks to serve two purposes: (i) to clarify the position of the focus group interview within the qualitative paradigm, and (ii) to raise conscious awareness of the focus group interview as a viable research method in language classroom studies, particularly where interactional data is involved. Seedhouse (2005, 535) has argued that the lack of an 'emic' perspective in language classroom studies, which takes into account crucial details of interactional data, has often resulted in an incomplete, unreliable and inaccurate examination of a phenomenon. It would appear then that this paper could be a timely initiation of the focus group interview as a valuable research tool in language and ESL classroom studies.

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ENDNOTES

1 For the purpose of this paper, I am using 'focus group interview' and 'discussion group' interchangeably, without following the distinctions made by Basch (1987) and Green and Hart (1999) regarding the relationship among participants.

2 In this paper, the following transcription conventions are used:

[[	]]	overlap
.		short pause
M		moderator
…		longer pause
Ss		students
S1		individual student
_____		talk inaudible on tape
!		show surprise
-		interrupted speech
(	)	moderator's insertion
[	]	elaboration of speech

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