Use of Focus Groups to Improve a Professional Development Needs Assessment Survey for EFL Instructors

Fatoş Uğur Eskiçırak

Abstract: This paper focuses on the process followed to further improve a needs assessment survey used for large-scale research which aimed to identify the perceived professional development needs, interests and preferences of EFL instructors working at the preparatory schools of universities. Focus group interviews were mainly used to collect qualitative data to generate new items and refine existing ones in the research instrument. The process of holding focus groups will be described in detail to inform other researchers considering using focus group interviews for the same purposes.

Index Terms: Focus group, needs assessment survey, English as a Foreign Language instructors, survey development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature provides only a few accounts of how focus groups are used for developing, improving and adapting surveys. Considering there is clearly a need in literature for a detailed description of how focus groups could be used for instrument development, this paper aims to give a detailed account of how focus groups have been used to generate new survey items and refine existing ones in a professional development needs assessment survey.

II. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Marzcak and Sewell (2007) define focus groups as a "*group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue*". Focus group interviews nurture different perceptions and points of view and are used to gather information for discovery, bench marking, evaluating, verifying perceptions, feelings, opinions and thoughts (Patton, 1990)

Focus groups could be used to collect qualitative in-depth information, where exploration and identification of attitudes, behaviors and processes are primary research objectives. They can be used in three ways in the research design:

1. As a stand-alone method
2. As supplementary to a survey
3. As part of a multi method design

The type of design will depend on the objectives of the research. When focus groups are used as the sole source of data, the objectives center on identification, exploration, and illumination, whereas, when these objectives are coupled with quantification, a multi method design will be the preferred option (McQuarrie 1996).

A more specific use of focus groups is in the process of developing research instruments. Focus groups are commonly used to generate items for the development of a questionnaire (Kim et al, 2005). Ary and his colleagues (2010), for example, suggest using focus group interviews to revise or develop a research questionnaire by bringing together a few groups of 5 to 10 people representative of the study population to discuss the topics covered in the survey. They think a focus group interview helps the researcher understand how people talk about the survey issues, which is helpful in choosing vocabulary and in phrasing questions. They assert that a focus group can often suggest issues, concerns, or points of view about the topic that the researcher had not considered before (Ary and et al., 2010).

According to Dörnyei (2007) in Applied Linguistics research, focus group interviews have been widely used for generating ideas to inform the development of questionnaires (and subsequent deep interviews (p. 146). Dörnyei states "a frequently recommended procedure for designing a new questionnaire involves conducting a small-scale exploratory qualitative study first –usually focus group interviews- to provide background information on the context to identify or narrow down the focus of the possible variables and to act as a valuable source of ideas for preparing the item pool for questionnaire scale construction." "*Such a design*" Dörnyei continues "*is effective in improving the content representation of the survey and thus the internal validity of the study.*"

When focus group interviews are used to develop questions to be asked in a questionnaire, their role becomes "exploratory" and they do not aim to "generalize" the findings (Threlfall, 1999). Focus group interviews are reported to produce very successful results in particularly defining the survey items (Morgan, 1997).

III. BACKGROUND

The purpose of the study, which required creation of a new research instrument, was to identify the perceived professional development needs, interests and preferences of EFL instructors working at the preparatory schools of universities. The researcher first aimed to use an existing instrument as this would be more practical and convenient but she could not find one that would fit the current study as there were very few studies on professional development needs assessment of foreign language teachers. Some needs assessment surveys were carefully analyzed and it was found out that they would not prove appropriate due to several reasons:

(1) Some were designed to identify the needs of K-12 teachers and due to context related differences the tool used would not be suitable to elicit the needs of teachers teaching English at tertiary level. (2) Some only looked at the needs of a specific school and was not suitable for a bigger scale study like this. (3) Some were limited to only a few aspects of professional development needs and again was not suitable for this large-scale study. (4) Some of them dated back to at least 10 years ago so some questions or sections would not be appropriate for the present study. Therefore, the researcher designed a first draft of the survey from scratch to better meet the requirements of the current study. To make sure the survey was precise and relevant for the target population, she decided to conduct focus group interviews with some representatives from the target population, as they would be an excellent resource for obtaining information critical in item generation and refinement.

IV. METHOD

A. Pre-Focus Group Process

Mainly focus group interviews were preferred to collect data to improve the needs assessment survey in the present study. The most important question that needed to be answered before holding the focus group interviews was about "how to sample" the focus groups. As the researcher aimed to adapt a research instrument about professional development needs of teachers of English at universities, all the participants needed to reflect the profile of the target group of respondents (i.e. English instructors at the preparatory schools). Therefore, only instructors teaching at state or foundation/private universities' English preparatory programs were decided to construct the sampling here (Bloor, et al., 2001, p. 30). A "*purposive sampling*" was preferred as the primary aim was to adapt the survey rather than making generalisations. Just for the "trainers" focus group participants, however, "snowballing sampling" was preferred. In this case; the researcher contacted a trainer in one of the foundation universities and she was asked to recruit the trainers working in her own institution. First it was decided to have only focus group discussions. However, as the directors had really tight schedules, it was not possible to bring them together for a focus group meeting so individual interview for each had to be performed.

The next step in planning and conducting focus groups involved identifying the moderator (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). It was decided that the researcher would serve best as the moderator because an overall understanding of the study was deemed necessary to keep the focus groups on task. Although Morgan (1988) does not suggest that focus group interviews are facilitated by the researcher due to potential researcher bias, Hamaydeh (2006) argues that when used as an exploratory tool, focus groups are not subject to probable researcher bias as the researcher does not have a clear vision and stable opinion about the topic under study yet (as cited in Masadeh, 2012).

Next, what kind of interview structure would be employed was decided. Semi-structured guide was preferred to let flexibility whenever relevant. This guide was also shared with the participants later when they were invited to focus group meetings and interviews.

In line with the interview guide, the researcher decided to use a pre-designed interview questionnaire. The questionnaire would include the same topics in the main survey but the questions would be open ended to help the researcher brainstorm the factors to be provided in the main one. The topics and related questions were decided by analyzing the relevant literature. The questionnaire consisted of questions focusing on how teachers define PD, why they participate in PD activities, their expectations from PD, what hinders them, their preferences regarding the content, design and mode as well as trainer related preferences.

Because the questionnaire would serve as the preliminary open-ended version of the main survey tool to be used in the study, it was very important that it was complete and accurate. Therefore, the researcher wanted to pre-test the questionnaire so she got feedback from several experts (e.g. associate professors interested in qualitative research, teacher trainers etc.) and some volunteers regarding the content, wording and organization of the items in the questionnaire. In this way, both experts and representatives from the population were utilized for pretesting purposes (Krueger, 1994).

The next step involved recruiting the sample selected (Bloor et al., 2001). Two questions needed to be answered at this stage were: (1) How to construct the sample and (2) and how many groups to recruit. Different experts suggest different numbers for the minimum required number of groups. Some think *two* (Vaughn et al., 1996) and some think (Krueger, 1994) *three* groups are necessary to comprise a focus group study. As the main aim of holding focus group meetings and interviews was to collect data to generate and refine the main survey about professional development needs of preparatory school teachers, it was considered the sample should consist of volunteers who were involved in professional development activities. Such volunteers would also help the researcher improve the terminology to be used in the main survey. Besides, it was also thought the participants of focus groups should be representative of the overall population. Accordingly, it was decided that there should be volunteers who were involved in formal and/or informal professional development activities. It would be easier to group the volunteers based on the kind of professional development activities they completed before. Accordingly, three groups were formed based on the qualifications they hold: one group of teachers with an ICELT (In-Service Certificate in English Language Teaching), one group of teachers with a DELTA (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and one group of teachers with an MA TEFL (Master's in Teaching English as Foreign Language) qualification. As the providers or organizers of professional development activities, trainers should be represented in the groups so a group of trainers was also formed. Similarly, directors or vice directors' points of views were very important as they were generally the main decision makers related to professional development activities in their contexts. So a group of two directors and a vice-director was also identified to form a focus group. However, due to their tight schedules, it was not possible to bring them together so it was decided to have individual interviews with each of them instead. To better serve the purpose of the focus groups and interviews,

Directors were chosen from the ones who were very actively involved in professional development activities. Members of one of the focus groups (i.e. MA TEF Lers) and a vice-director were chosen from a state university to better reflect the target population. Below are the details of 4 focus groups and 3 individual interviews:

1. A focus group consisted of 4 trainers from a foundation university in Istanbul

2. A focus group consisted of 5 experienced teachers with an ICELT qualification from a foundation university in Istanbul

3. A focus group consisted of 6 experienced teachers with a DELTA qualification from a foundation university in Istanbul.

4. A focus group consisted of 3 experienced teachers with an MA in TEFL (At first, 5 teachers volunteered but 2 of them could not attend the meeting due to health problems) All were from a state university outside Istanbul.

5. 3 individual interviews with directors/vice directors. 2 directors were from foundation universities and the vice director was from a state university in Istanbul.

Such a grouping would help the researcher achieve intergroup heterogeneity and intragroup homogeneity with regard to members' qualifications and positions at their institutions. In this way, each group could focus on the issue from their own perspectives and enrich the data to be collected. The researcher ensured each focus group consisted of 4-6 volunteers as much as possible because this number is thought be the ideal mini-group size for focus groups (Greenbaum, 1993 & Krueger, 1994). That is, this size is considered large enough to generate discussion, but small enough to maintain the necessary control over the agenda to be followed.

Conducting focus group meetings and individual interviews also required some logistical decisions such as where the meetings would be held, when and what time and for how long (Krueger, 1994). To decide on a day and time, participants were first sent an invitation email summarizing the purpose, structure, content and ethical guidelines of the meeting as well as asking them to share their most convenient days and times with the researcher. Based on the participants' preferences, the researcher selected the most common convenient day and time and informed the participants accordingly. As it would be more convenient for the participants, meetings would be held at the university affiliated with particular group members and/or interviewees. Some refreshments like water, tea, coffee, chocolate etc. would also be served during the sessions as incentives.

B. During-Focus Group Process:

The sessions were held in rooms convenient for all participants and far from noise and any possible disturbances. To create an inviting and relaxing atmosphere, some classical music was played in the background while the participants were gathering before the session. In some groups, upon the participants' request, the music continued to play at a low volume in the background. A circular seating arrangement was preferred so that all participants could see each other. This encouraged them to listen to and engage with each other on an ongoing basis.

The moderator started the meetings and interviews by reminding the purpose of the meeting, content of the questions and related ethical issues. The participants were reminded that the focus group session would be audio recorded for the researcher to study in detail after the meetings. However, they were reminded that the responses would be anonymous and the identities be kept confidential. Consequently, they were encouraged to express themselves freely as there were no right or wrong answers and anonymity would be ensured at all times. As the participants worked in the same institution in each focus group and knew each other and the moderator in most cases, no effort to build rapport was necessary. In all cases, all participants were eager and ready to share their responses with the moderator and were happy to contribute to the data collection process of the research.

There is no consensus on the suggested length of focus group sessions: some scholars suggest half an hour while some others two and a half hours per focus group. As it would be to everyone's benefit to collect the maximum amount of data in the shortest time possible, the sessions were planned to last 1 hour at maximum. This time limit was achieved in almost all the meetings; most lasted less than an hour.

There are different views about the number of questions to be posed to the participants in the focus group interviews. Some scholars suggest the ideal number is 8 (Eliot, 2005), some say it should be less than 10 (Kreuger, 1998) while some others suggest it should be less than 12 (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). There were approximately 12 main questions and related follow-up questions to be answered. The moderator posed each question and a follow-up question when necessary and elicited answers by making sure all participants had an equal opportunity to respond to each question.

The moderator's role was generally to interact with the participants, ask for clarifications or further details when necessary and to prevent dominations of some participants as well as encouraging more shy ones to contribute to the discussion. All meetings and interviews were audio recorded for later review.

C. Post-Focus Group Process

As already stated above, before conducting the focus group interviews, the researcher had prepared a first draft of the survey based on the related literature and surveys used in similar studies in and outside Turkey. After the first focus group meeting, the researcher listened to the recording and took notes to compare them later with the first draft of the survey and make the necessary changes on the first draft. Seeing such a method took more time than she expected, she changed her technique in the next one. This time, she listened to the recording and took notes directly on to the first draft of the survey. What she did was generally two things: she either color-coded the existing ones mentioned by the participants in the survey or added new factors mentioned by the participants but were not in the first draft of the survey. She then color-coded these and specified which task group mentioned them. The ones in red showed the ones mentioned by the participants and the black ones were the ones not mentioned by any of them. If an item was repeated by other participants, this was specified in brackets. This would let the researcher see which factors were more popular and make the final changes in line with this. After listening to all the recordings and adding new factors into the first draft and color-coding them, the second draft of the survey was ready for final refinement.

Focus group interviews were conducted to refine the items in the first draft of the survey and/or generate additional ones if necessary.

However, focus groups and interviews were not sufficient on their own for further refinement. For this very reason, the researcher continued to critically analyze the survey for further improvement. This involved making sure the best terminology was preferred in case different participants preferred different jargons for the same concepts, items did not occur repetitively for no good reason etc. This is followed by the feedback process from experts and colleagues and finally a pilot study was carried out to see whether the survey was ready for the research.

V. OUTCOME OF THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWING PROCESS

The main outcome of the long process of holding focus group interviews and analyzing the data obtained from those was "a second draft of the instrument of the professional development needs analysis study".

Assuming an online questionnaire would increase the response rate of the survey, one was created using a cloud-based online survey tool at https://www.instant.ly. No hard copy was prepared and only online version is preferred to collect data.

The survey was accompanied by a cover letter stating the purpose and introducing the nature of the study. The survey consisted of 31 questions.

The first 17 questions aimed to identify the profile of the participants and their work context. This part consisted of items eliciting demographics about participants' personal, professional and educational characteristics as well as their work related details. The items here specifically sought participants' gender, age whether or not they were native speakers, their education and training related qualifications, experience in teaching, type of institution they work (i.e. state or foundation university), membership to a teacher development association or organization, their professional responsibilities at work as well as whether or not their school has a Professional Development Unit and the activities are compulsory.

The next part consisted of questions aiming to elicit participants' perceived professional development needs and preferences. Below is a detailed description of what each question elicited and how it did so:

Question 18 was an open-ended one inviting teachers to define professional development in their own words. This question intended to find out what each teacher understands by the term professional development and prefers which terms, adjectives, associations and metaphors to describe it.

Question 19 elicited teachers' preferences about different types of professional development activities. To this end, 26 different types of professional development activities were provided and teachers were asked to check one or more of the activities they find most useful. They were also given an opportunity to add an activity type they find useful but was not included in the list through "Other, please specify" option.

Question 20 elicited teachers' content related needs in ELT. Related to that, 47 ELT related knowledge areas and skills were listed and teachers were asked to check the ones they think they need most. They were also provided with an opportunity to add a skill/area they think they need but was not included in the list through "Other, please specify" option.

Questions 21-23 aimed to identify teachers' preferences related to the assessment processes and delivery modes. Participants first needed to decide whether or not they would prefer to be assessed as part of a professional development activity through question 21. For the ones who said "yes", there was a follow-up question where they would check the most preferred ones from 16 assessment forms/techniques provided. They were also given an opportunity to add an assessment form/technique they would find appropriate but was not included in the given list. Question 23 elicited which mode they would prefer from the three options provided: online, face to face and blended.

Question 24 aimed to elicit teachers' expectations from a professional development activity. Regarding this, 12 factors were listed and respondents were asked to check the one(s) they expect from a professional development activity. Respondents were also provided with an opportunity to list their own expectation(s), if it was not given in the list through "Other, please specify" option.

Questions 25 and 26 aimed to find out what motivates and encourages the respondents to participate in Professional development activities. Specifically, 20 internal motivational factors were listed in question 25 and respondents were asked to check the one(s) they think motivate them most. In the same way, 10 external motivational factors were listed in question 26 and respondents were asked to check the one(s) they think encourage them most. In both questions, they were allowed to add their own factors which were not provided in the lists through "Other, please specify" option.

Question 27 aimed to find out what hinders the respondents from pursuing professional development. Regarding this, 20 hindering factors were listed and respondents were asked to check the one(s) they think hinder them most. They were also provided with an opportunity to add their own hindering factor(s) through "Other, please specify" option.

The last four questions (i.e. 28-31) sought participants' trainer related preferences. Question 28 aimed to elicit the minimum qualification the respondents think a trainer should have and question 29, the courses a trainer should complete to qualify. Question 30 elicited the respondents' preferences about a trainer's being a native speaker of English or not. In addition, through question 31, they also shared their preferences about the trainer's workplace.

VI. CONCLUSION

Use of focus group interviews as an exploratory data collection method to develop a needs assessment survey in the present study served as an invaluable tool and helped the researcher develop and formulate appropriate items necessary for a valid and reliable survey. More specifically, the data obtained from the focus group interviews helped the researcher elaborate conceptualizations of key topics to be included in the survey and identify new content that was incorporated into item development. Besides, language used by the participants informed the choice of terminology and helped the researcher articulate appropriately worded survey items. So, the researcher in the present study advocates use of focus groups to inform a valid and reliable instrument development.

And/or improvement process. As there is no strong consensus on the precise characteristics of an ideal focus group, accounts like the one in this study are believed to guide other researchers aiming to use focus groups for similar purposes.

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She has designed and run several professional development activities tailor-made just for Bahçeşehir University School of Foreign Language teachers. Among these activities were *CARP (Collaborative Action Research Project)*, *Reading Club, PDC (Professional Development Course), Induction Training Program*, *Developmental Class Visits*, *Short Courses* (e.g. *Task Based Teaching, Clinical Supervision Process* etc.), *Reflection Sessions for New Teachers* and so on.

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