

Focus Groups for Curriculum Evaluation

—Analyzing Student Responses to an Academic Reading Course—

Cheryl DiCELLO*

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate student evaluations through audio-recorded focus groups for a fifteen-week English as a foreign language (EFL) reading course. The following research questions guided the focus groups: (1) Were the course objectives met? (2) Do students want these course objectives? (3) Was the grade weighting fair? (4) How much time did students spend preparing for class? (5) What did students say about the homework load? (6) What did students say about the vocabulary studied? (7) What did students say about the mid-term and final? (8) Were the materials explaining the course objectives and expectations clear to the students?

Introduction

This paper introduces focus group research methods, introduces the course the focus group was formed to evaluate and then outlines my own methods, results, analysis and numerous points of weaknesses.

Literature Review

Curriculum Evaluation

This study is an example of a product orientated approach to curriculum evaluation. According to Brown (1994), this approach is used to focus on the goals of instructional objectives and creates an evaluation process to confirm whether or not these goals were achieved (pp. 219–20). Brown (1994) suggested using several sources to confirm these goals, “including, but not restricted to, the students, the subject matter, instructional materials, the society at large, philosophy of education, learning philosophy, and more” (p. 220). For this study, the source for confirming the instructional goals of the course were the students. Course evaluation should always keep focus on the following four guidelines for choosing course evaluation questions: (1) Define and connect the purpose for

* *School of Cross-Cultural Studies, Department Foreign Studies*

any data to collect, (2) Keep all data collectors informed of your purpose for that data, (3) Confirm that your source will be able to answer your research questions, (4) Be adaptable and use what is available to you (Brown, 2003, p. 249). Grabe and Stoller (2011) recommended that due to the importance of motivation factoring into the increase of reading comprehension any reading researcher should keep in mind the following two questions, “How can instruction support the development of student motivation? How well can motivational instruction be incorporated into a realistic curriculum?” (p. 87). With this in mind I felt that a focus group would give students an opportunity to expand upon their reasons for why the objectives of the course were or were not met and be open enough for them to comment on other factors beyond the initial questions asked.

Focus Groups

According to Tomlinson (2013), any discourse a student makes within the range of a teacher will be more stilted and unnatural compared to student discourse away from the teacher (p. 47). With this in mind, I chose to use focus groups for this study since the teacher is not in the same room for this kind of data collection. According to Templeton (1996), focus group size should be between four and twelve members of the target group (p. 162). Instead of the teacher interviewing a student face to face, a moderator is put in charge of leading a focus group through the questions. The moderator should be a liaison between the target group, in this case the students in the reading class, and the researcher (Templeton, 1996, p. 87).

The Current Study

The Course

The course investigated was a second year competitive entry, academic, reading course. During the second semester of their freshman year, students in the program apply to enter the course. The year of this course over 100 students applied to join, of which about 60 students were accepted. These students were then divided into three ToEIC-score-streamed sections of 20 students per section. One section was taught by the researcher and the other two sections were taught by an adjunct faculty member.

Course objectives. The course had six main objectives outlined to the students on the syllabus. These objectives were; enjoy reading in English, read confidently in English, learn more useful vocabulary, gain knowledge through reading, understand how reading tests are made and how to study for them, and easily summarize and discuss what you read.

Enjoy reading in English. I assumed that this objective could be met by discussing the news articles, and talking about the books the students recommended to each other during class time. The reading required to participate in these activities would hopefully be enjoyed. Since this was all assumption, I wanted to ascertain if the students had a similar opinion or not and whether they felt this was a suitable objective for the course.

Read confidently in English. My hypothesis before the focus groups was that this objective could be met through extensive reading and through observing increases in speed during the speed reading homework.

Learn more useful vocabulary. I assumed that the vocabulary students were being quizzed on would be deemed as useful for them. Of course, I needed to find out what the students' opinions were and if they were learning new vocabulary that was useful for their specific purposes.

Gain knowledge through reading. Reading the news articles would probably fulfill this objective.

Understand how reading tests are made and how to study for them. The review, the handbook, and the taking of mid-terms and final exams would probably fulfill this objective.

Easily summarize and discuss what you read. I assumed after much practice of summarizing news articles for the class, that students would fulfill or perhaps partially fulfill this objective.

Materials. The course utilized three textbooks, *Select Readings: Teacher-Approved Readings for Today's Students, Intermediate* (Lee & Gunderson, 2011), *Reading for Speed and Fluency 2* (Nation & Malarcher, 2007), and *Learning English Vocabulary* (Barker, 2010). In addition to the textbooks, each student purchased a subscription to an ESL newspaper called News For You (New Readers Press).

Homework. Students were required to read 10,000 words per week for extensive reading. They were also required to prepare to discuss from the Select Readings text every other week. On the week following preparation they needed to submit the unit's reading comprehension, reading skill and vocabulary sections' practice from the textbook. All homework and due dates were given to them in the in house handbook for the course on the first day of the spring and fall terms. On the weeks they were not preparing to review the textbook, students were to summarize and discuss one news article from the weekly paper that they thought was interesting in groups. They also had to prepare in written form three discussion questions connecting the article's topic to their and their classmates' lives. In addition, students needed to time themselves reading one page from their *Reading for Speed and Fluency* text. On the first day of class, approximated time for completely the homework was outlined in the handbook during class to be between two and three hours per week. This information was taken from previous student's survey data for the benefit of student preparation. Students were required to give five extensive reading recommendations to their classmates through the class LINE group each semester. Students also needed to prepare to recommend a book every other week for one minute to a classmate. Finally, students needed to study for a vocabulary quiz of 25 new words and 25 words from the previous week starting at word 1,000 from the general service list according to their *Learning English Vocabulary* text. Students had the option to study this vocabulary from Quizlet sets of the part of speech and syllable pattern, translation and fill-in-the-blank sets created by the researcher. This allowed for students to listen to the pronunciation and study from their phones.

Grade Weighting. Grade weighting for the course was based on previous student reports of how much time they spent on each part of the coursework resulting in 30% of their grade calculated from weekly extensive reading logs, 25% on weekly vocabulary quizzes, 25% on exams (mid-term and final), 10% on their self grades of their participation and outside practice in the self access center, and 10% on their textbook homework completion and news discussion questions.

Participants

Participants ($n=3$) in this study were second year students at a women's university in Japan. All participants had enrolled in an academic EFL reading course. Students were selected on a voluntary basis. Two students from each of the three sections were initially requested through the English conversation group as these students were assumed to be highly motivated to learn English and take the focus group seriously with the prerequisite that they had to be members of the course being evaluated. Only three students were able to make time to meet for the focus group which was held between the fall and spring semester break.

Research Questions

The questions addressed in this paper are the following:

1. Were the course objectives met?
2. Do students want these objectives?
3. Was the grade weighting fair?
4. How much time did students spend preparing for the class?
5. What did students say about the homework load?
6. What did students say about the vocabulary studied?
7. What did students say about the mid-term and final?
8. Should the materials explaining the course be revised?

Method

After the final exam, students ($n=3$) were given a questionnaire (Appendix A) a week before the planned meeting to give them time to think about the questions for the focus group. I also met separately with one of the students who agreed to be the focus group leader. The group leader's role was to make sure that all the students said their opinions for each question, even if it were the same as the others. On the day of the focus group, the students met in my office and I gave them an audio recorder. I asked them if I should leave and they all approved my presence. This goes against focus group practice (Templeton, 1996) and I was a little curious to check what would happen if I were there versus not there. Upon leaving the room, all the recorded information changed from English to Japanese language. The pace also increased, confirming that the researcher in the room of a focus group does have a possible affect in this case. Students continued discussing the questions for a total of 51.48 minutes according to the audio recording. All students spoke and responded to each question. I listened to the audio recording taking notes on each members' advice, translating to English at the same time. I then typed my notes and arranged them into each question from the questionnaire. One month later, I re-listened to the recording and took notes again. I typed these notes and then arranged them to fit each questionnaire question. I compared my two sets of notes, circling the parts that matched and crossing out parts that were not in both notes. I typed up the revised notes and used these for my analysis.

Results and Analysis

According to my notes of the audio recording. The following data was reported by the students in regards to each research question.

Were the course objectives met? Overall, the students reported that most of the course objectives were met to various degrees:

Enjoy reading in English. All three students mentioned that enjoying reading did occur in connection to the course, specifically some of the *News For You* articles, the fill-in-the-blank story for vocabulary study because of the characters continuing to appear each week on the class's fill-in-the-blank Quizlet sets, and through extensive reading. One student mentioned that she enjoyed the articles in the *Reading for Speed and Fluency* textbook during the second semester of the course. Students did not specify which type of reading homework was most enjoyable for them out of what they mentioned.

Read confidently in English. Students did not speak about this objective on the recording. It is possible that they avoided talking about this objective because it was not met. It is also possible that the objective's wording is too broad and should be narrowed to specify what type of reading students should feel confident about reading in English by the end of the course.

Learn more useful vocabulary. One student reported that she would find the vocabulary in her TOEIC course and be excited because she had seen the word before. All students mentioned that they did learn more useful vocabulary, but they were worried that they had already forgotten it at the time of the focus group. Students talked four minutes about vocabulary studying. They compared their first year and second year vocabulary quizzes and discussed what they felt was good and what was lacking about how the vocabulary was taught in the classes. One point was made that quizzing for the syllable patterns felt like a waste of time to them. Instead they recommended a course be made in the first year about English phonology (in the students' words, "pronunciation symbols and practice"). In regards to fairness, students noted that a constant quiz format gave them confidence in what and how they should study. They also stated that the current second year quiz format asked a suitable amount of questions. The current quizzes consisted of ten questions on part of speech and syllable pattern, ten questions on translation into English and ten fill-in-the-blank questions in order to test collocations. One student commented that she had stopped playing games on her train ride and now uses Quizlet to study because she found it helping her learn and listen to the vocabulary. One student reported that the Quizlet sets worked much better for her than only studying with paper.

Gain knowledge through reading. When discussing this objective one student reported that she probably gained knowledge through reading the newspaper articles, but cannot remember what she learned. After, another student responded that she got used to reading for information instead of comprehension through speed reading and maybe extensive reading. The other student agreed but did not elaborate on her response.

Understand how reading tests are made and how to study for them. This discussion started with explaining how the tests were created in great detail for this course. Students mentioned the key terms, main idea and supporting details of the news articles being important. They mentioned the

number of articles being a little too much and also discussed that they didn't initially realize that the Select Readings textbook question formats were the ones being used during the creation of the mid-term and final. From their unhalting explanation of how the tests were made, it seems safe to assume that they probably understood how the reading test for this course was made, but I am uncertain if they extended that knowledge to reading comprehension item making in regards to other standardized tests applicable to their future such as the TOEIC and TOEFL.

Easily summarize and discuss what you read. Upon reaching this objective, the students talked about how they felt the discussion questions had a greater focus than the summarizing. They only discussed summarizing in regards to the news articles. Although I have observed students summarizing their book recommendations during class and also the textbook readings to each other, as that is part of in class work, this was not mentioned during the focus group. Perhaps, students were discussing the newspaper articles because of how they were used on the mid-term and final and they reported it not being sufficient. Students recommended that more time be dedicated at the beginning of the course to model and practice summarizing the news articles and news article discussion questions. Students then discussed at length what might be a better way to do the news discussion and summarizing, because they reported that they liked it. They also mentioned that they wanted to do news discussion in smaller groups of two or three members and do the news discussion every week instead of every other week. One student mentioned that even their speaking class was lacking in speaking, which is why they want more discussion practice time in the reading course. The students reported that the speaking class had a lot of listening to other students' presentations causing their personal speaking time to be reduced.

Do students want these objectives? Although students didn't discuss this question in detail, they did say yes, that these objectives fit the course they expected.

Was the grade weighting fair? One student mentioned that they didn't find the self-participation grades necessary as part of their grade for a reading course. Instead, they recommended the teacher decide the participation grade or cut it from the weighting. The other point of disagreement with the current weighting was the participation outside of class in the self-access center. This was, as they explained, due to different workers at the center allowing or not allowing them to get credit for going to the self access center. Originally this homework wasn't part of the reading course, therefore, has been cut from the next year's course.

How much time did students spend preparing for class? One student reported that she spent about two hours a week preparing for the course. Another student mentioned that if she considered the study time for vocabulary quizzes, on average, she studied three hours per week for the course. The other student did not verbally answer the question.

What did students say about the homework load? All three students reported disliking the LINE book recommendation homework, saying that they didn't read other students' recommendations and instead just did the homework and ignored the LINE group. One other point mentioned was that they wanted to take time to go over the textbook more thoroughly in class instead of using 15 minutes weekly for extensive reading. Students suggested that the discussion time for homework was something they couldn't do outside of class, but that extensive reading

could be done outside of class. One student recommended cutting the time to 5 or 10 minutes of class time. Another student said that although she liked reading in class, she thought it would be more important to spend that time in active discussion. Nearing the end of the focus group recording this topic was again talked about by the students. They reflected that it is a reading course and perhaps one reason they wanted to reduce the reading time was because they didn't have enough time to practice speaking in other English courses. Their final agreement was that there should be 10 minutes dedicated to extensive reading in each class instead of 15, but that the speaking class should add more speaking practice time instead of presentation preparation time during the class.

What did students say about the vocabulary studied? The students recommended continuing with using the Quizlet sets. All three students mentioned preferring a consistent quiz format, because it gave them confidence in how to study for the vocabulary quiz. All three reported that the syllable pattern section of the quiz was not useful for them. Instead, they recommended that the first year course add a mandatory course focusing on pronunciation of written English for all students majoring in English.

What did students say about the mid-term and final? One student reported that she understood how the tests were created, but needed more time in class to confirm that she had indeed understood the articles. Another student recommended reducing the amount of articles possible for the exams. All three students said the current text length and number of questions was suitable for the test.

Should the materials explaining the course objectives and expectations be revised? One student asked why she had to purchase the Green Book, which contained the syllabi for all the first and second year courses again during the second year. She thought it hadn't changed. Another student suggested that some of the first year reading explanations on the difference between intensive reading and extensive reading be given in Japanese. She said this was confusing for her and her classmates during her first year. All three students suggested continuing with the handbook for the reading class but made no additional suggestions.

Strengths

One major strength of this study was that it gave extensive course feedback from the student point of view. Students were also very open to give their opinion in the audio-recorded focus group session. Since the focus group was conducted after the course was completed there was also no worry that what they said would influence their grades, which may have contributed to their candidness.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses of the present study includes the sample size being small, all participants were female, which makes it less applicable for non-women's university settings, and there is only a single point of data gathering for this paper. Perhaps more frequent focus groups could be more effective with the same group of students. Adding triangulation of data would also strengthen future focus group research.

References

- Barker, D., & Nation, P. (2010). *Learning English Vocabulary* (2nd edition). BTB Press.
- Brown, J. D. (1994). *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development*. Cengage Learning.
- Brown, J. D. (2003). *Doing Second Language Research*. Oxford UP.
- Lee, L., & Gundersen, E. (2011). *Select Readings: Second Edition Intermediate Student Book*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- New Readers Press. (n.d.). News For You | New Readers Press. Retrieved from <http://www.newreaderspress.com/news-for-you-online>
- Nation, P., & Malarcher, C. (2007). *Reading for Speed and Fluency 2 Student Book*. Korea: Compass Publishing, c2007: Compass Publishing Japan.
- Templeton, J. F. (1996). *The Focus Group: A Strategic Guide to Organizing, Conducting and Analyzing the Focus Group Interview* (1st edition). Chicago, Ill.: McGraw-Hill.
- Tomlinson, B. (2013). *Applied Linguistics and Materials Development* (1 edition). London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- William Peter Grabe, & Stoller, F. L. (2011). *Teaching and Researching: Reading* (2 Edition). Harlow, England; New York: Routledge.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questionnaire

Note that the original format was landscape with English on the left side and Japanese on the right side.

January 23 Focus Group

Goal: Get Your advice to improve the AE Reading class

1. Course Objectives. Which of these do you think most students obtain through the class? In what way do they get it?
 - Enjoy reading in English
 - Read confidently in English
 - Learn more useful vocabulary
 - Gain knowledge through reading
 - Understand how reading tests are made and how to study for them
 - Easily summarize and discuss what they read
2. Which of the above goals are you interested in having? What were your goals for AE Reading?
3. Does the grading % show how much work you did? Should something be worth more (or less) of your grade? Please give me advice on the most fair % for each work.
 - 30% Extensive Reading
 - 25% Vocabulary Quizzes
 - 25% Exams
 - 0% Sac/Annex Record & DSRs
 - 10% Textbook Homework and Discussion Questions
4. How much time did you plan to study for this course each week? Was it more than you expected? Should this course have less homework? Please explain your homework recommendations in detail.
5. Vocabulary Quiz: Are the words you study useful?
What do you think about testing part of speech, syllable patterns, translation and fill in the blank? Does this kind of quiz help you learn the vocabulary? Please teach me what kind of quiz you think will help you study vocabulary in a way so you will learn it and be able to use it.
6. Tests: Do you think the Mid-term and Final help you carefully read and help you comprehend many news articles? Do they help you improve your English reading comprehension?
How many articles and questions should the test have?
7. Are there any explanations from your AE Reading Handbook or Green Book that you think should have a Japanese version? Is there any other information that we should add or change in the Handbook?
8. Please feel free to make any additional comments or advice.

Thank you so much!!!!

日本語版「片言ですみません」 1月23日フォーカスグループ【相談会】

この会の目的は：AE Reading を改善するため、自由に助言と意見を教えてください。

1. AE READING の目標：下記の目標の中、どちらをたいの学習者は実現したと思いますか。どうやって、実現したと思いました？具体的に教えてください。
 - 英語で読むことが楽しいところがあると思われること。
 - 英語で読むとき、これは頑張ったら、きっと理解できるだろうの自信を持つこと。
 - 自分にとって便利な単語を習得すること。
 - 読書で知恵を得ること。
 - 読解試験はどうやって作られているとどうやって、勉強すればいいかを理解すること。
 - スムーズに自分が英語で読んだものを相手に纏められることと、自分の意見と相手の意見を会話すると理解すること。
2. 上記の目標について、どれらは自分にとってそれをできるようにしたいとおもいましたか「また、はますか」。あなたは AE READING でどんな目標がありましたか。
3. 現在の成績の割り方で自分が頑張ったと、似ている重さで判断していますか。もし、割り方にたいして、もっと重いか軽いところがあれば、教えてください。自分が頑張った分と同じ重さで評価したいですから。
 - 30% 多読
 - 25% 単語クイズ
 - 25% 試験
 - 10% SAC/ANNEX 記録と DSR の自己評価
 - 10% 教科書宿題と新聞の質問
4. AE READING のため、週に何時間ぐらいは勉強したと思いますか。それは思つとより、多いでしたか。この授業は宿題を少し減らした方がいいですか？具体的に自分のお進めな宿題と量を教えてください。
5. 単語クイズに関して：単語クイズで勉強した単語で自分に対して、役に立つと思いますか。品詞、音節のパターン、和訳、穴埋め出題をクイズで確認することは必要と思いますか？こういうスタイルなクイズはその単語を習得することに役に立つと思いますか？どんなクイズは自分にたいして、新しい単語を覚えられると実際に使われることを手伝うと思いますか。
6. 試験：中期と終了試験を勉強するため、あなたはいろいろな新聞の記事を細かくまで集中して、と理解できるようにさせたと思いますか。自分の英語読解力を上げるとおもいますか。質問数と記事の数はいくつがお勧めしますか。
7. AE READING HANDBOOK や GREENBOOK には日本版を書いた方がいいと思うところがありますか。どこのところですか。それと、足りないの説明や増やしたい情報は HANDBOOK に書いた方がいいのはあれば、教えてください。
8. 他のアドバイスや意見を自由に教えてください。

Thank you so much!!!