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## Using focus groups to investigate study abroad theories and practice

Paula Winke

Michigan State University, United States

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I review 10 qualitative and mixed-methods research articles on study abroad that employed focus groups. I look specifically at the quality of the focus group reporting, which I evaluated by comparing the methods reported on in the studies against focus group reporting criteria described by Krueger and Casey (2015). I generally found that applied linguists and international education researchers who investigate study abroad have yet to take full advantage of focus groups. Most studies lacked clear focus group descriptions. Missing was information on the directions, who participated, who the moderator was, what the script or questions were, and when the focus groups were held. On the other hand, the 10 studies collectively demonstrate the strong potential of focus groups to help applied linguists better understand theories and hypotheses about study abroad. In particular, focus groups have an advantage in helping researchers understand how students develop interculturality during study abroad, and how various social factors, such as social media use and host-family contact, impact study abroad experiences and language learning. Study abroad researchers should learn more about focus groups and their specific advantages to increase study robustness, and to build a stronger theoretical basis for study abroad's continued use.

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### 1. Introduction

Focus groups are a tool used by social and behavioral scientists to understand opinions, motivations, attitudes, and thought processes that underlie behaviors surrounding certain societal objects or specific events (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). More broadly, a focus group may be viewed as a special type of interactive group discussion (Ho, 2012). This method for qualitative data collection within applied linguistics has grown and expanded in the field recently, especially when the societal object or event can be identified as having a large impact or influence on behaviors (including learning behaviors), such as study abroad (DeKeyser, 2014).

Study abroad researchers have successfully used focus groups to understand students' choices and decisions regarding study abroad (Doyle, Gendall, Meyer, Hoek, & Tait, 2010; Foster, 2014; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2016); how study abroad changes students' perceptions on culture, learning, and the world (Bacon, 2002; Ching, Lien, & Chao, 2014; Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis, 2012; McLeod & Wainwright, 2009; Medina, Hathaway, & Pilonieta, 2015); and how study abroad contributes to the language-development process (Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin, & Murphy, 2016; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005). But thus far, there has been no succinct review of how focus groups have been (and can be) used to support and enhance applied linguists'

E-mail address: [winke@msu.edu](mailto:winke@msu.edu).

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research on study abroad. This review is necessary because both qualitative study abroad research and focus group methodology are of age. How well the data collection tool (focus groups) is used by researchers investigating this robust educational phenomenon (study abroad) needs empirical investigation so that applied linguists can check whether they are using the tool well, and whether they are using it to its full potential.

In this paper, I first review focus groups in the general tradition of social science research because focus groups are a data collection tool that applied linguists have borrowed from the social science fields of marketing and business management. Second, I provide the procedures of this descriptive research report in which I and a graduate research assistant reviewed 10 recent applied linguistics or international education research studies in which the authors used focus groups to investigate various aspects of study abroad. (She and I coded the 10 empirical research studies for *focus group reporting quality*.) Third, I summarize the quality of the focus-group reporting in the studies. And finally, I outline the strengths of these papers, and also review how the researchers could have given better information on their focus group designs and procedures.

## 2. Focus groups as a research tradition

Focus groups have been used for a long time in both public and private sector research, and they have a particularly strong basis in the behavioral sciences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015) and in marketing research (Parker & Tritter, 2006; Smithson, 2000). What is unique with a focus group, as opposed to series of one-on-one interviews or even a group interview, is that a focus group uses *group interaction* as a direct data collection method (Kitzinger, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, pp. 10–11).

### 2.1. Definition of focus groups in social science

The following descriptions encompass the nature of focus groups in social and behavioral science research:

1. A focus group is a “special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures. The purpose of a focus group is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service. Focus groups are used to gather opinions” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 2).
2. A focus group has “the primary aim of describing and understanding perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs of a select population to gain understanding of a particular issue from the perspectives of the group’s participants” (Kahn & Manderson, 1992, p. 57).

Individuals who share specific characteristics in common are recruited for focus groups, such as all individuals participating in the same summer study abroad program (Krueger & Casey, 2015). One defining characteristic of a focus group is the list of open-ended questions that were carefully designed to explore a topic about which little is known (Krueger, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). For example, if one of the questions the researcher has about the program is whether homestays have advantages over dormitory living, some of the open-ended questions during the focus group may zero in on this topic by asking the participants to “talk about their living situations during the study abroad program,” or to “discuss where they would advise new students to live during the same study abroad program next year.” The object is not for the group to come to a consensus or make decisions on which is better or should be offered in the future, but rather the goal is for the researcher to be able to use the discussion (or transcript of it) to gauge individuals’ perceptions on the topic, so that the researcher can understand the issues in a nuanced way, only making decisions or recommendations if that is the goal of the larger research project (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

### 2.2. General parameters for describing focus groups

Focus groups in the larger fields of social and applied research have a rather defined structure. Krueger and Casey (2015) outlined major features of a robust focus group for applied research. The definitions and parameters were and are prescriptive in nature, and some researchers have commented that not all focus groups will adhere to all specifications (Turney & Pocknee, 2005): The suggestions are just that; the criteria will not always apply to all focus group research (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Nevertheless, Krueger and Casey (2015) recommended that a focus group should (1) be comprised of people (plural) who will give the researcher the type of information needed, (2) be serial or sequential (involve several groups) to avoid generalizations influenced by outlying views, (3) involve a group of people with shared experiences (who are homogeneous, as defined by parameters established by the researcher) but who do not know the other group members too well, which will encourage uninhibited expression on a topic or experience, (4) be used for robust data collection that (5) produces data that are extremely qualitative in nature, and (6) be a *planned* and *focused* group discussion of the topic at hand by having a trained moderator who uses prepared scripts of the guidelines for participation and the open-ended questions. The parameters for focus groups outlined by Krueger and Casey (2015, pp. 6–8), and commented on by Turney and Pocknee (2005, pp. 36–39) are summarized in Table 1.

In the final column of Table 1 is a list of ways in which authors can report on the focus group parameters in their research studies. For example, researchers should document and disclose the number of people who participated in each of the focus

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