Changes and Challenges of Participating in Focus Group Discussion

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at exploring what the focus group discussion (FGD) participants learned from taking part in FGD sessions and the challenges facing them. Design-Based Research (DBR), suggested by Reeves (2006) was employed to carry out this study. There were 6 students and 3 lecturers taking part in this study. Data were collected through participants 'observations, participants' diaries, and group interviews. The data was analyzed by employing thematic analysis. The findings of this study revealed that the participants encountered psychological barriers such as feeling shy and lack of confidence to express their ideas. They also found it a challenge to structure their thoughts, extend or develop their ideas, and draw a conclusion. Another issue such as lack of ideas of discussed topics was also uncovered in this study. Furthermore, this study also revealed that throughout the discussion they gradually learned to express their thoughts and to respect other participants 'views, making them aware of the benefits of listening to other peoples' thoughts.
Keywords: Focus Group Discussion, Speaking, Critical Thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

A plethora of studies has been carried out to assess the effectiveness of discussions on students' academic performances. A large number of studies employed qualitative action research as a research method to solve the teaching and learning problems while the present study employed Design-Based Research (henceforth DBR) which would not only offer a solution to problems in language teaching and learning but also to produce design principles of FGD applicable for diverse contexts. Despite the existence of numerous studies of employing DBR in natural sciences, very little Design-Based Research has been conducted in the field of language teaching and learning [1]

FGD was mainly applied in qualitative research as a method to gain deep understanding on topics under study. However, studies focusing on the use of FGD to enhance learning are rarely available, despite the presence of a plethora of investigation on the impacts of small group discussions. The present study sought to design FGD as a method to enhance speaking and critical thinking for students of English language Education in an Indonesian private higher Education. Focus Group Discussion normally consists of smaller number of people participating, say 5-10. Being in a small group work, EFL learners would feel free to express themselves as it could help reduce anxiety to speak up in front of public [2]. Also, small group discussion would provide more talking time for the participants and enable them to communicate by using the language they have learned.

Another scholar [3] investigated the impact of small group discussion on speaking skill development. An action research consisting of three cycles revealed that small group discussion was effective to foster students' speaking skill, get them actively engaged in the group work discussion actively, encourage them to be independent learners, make them feel more relaxed at learning, give them more opportunities to improve their speaking skills. Another Classroom Action Research [4] revealed that participants' speaking skill was improved and they became more active through small group discussion.

An action research in Grade 6 of Pakistani Public School reported that significant improvement was resulted from giving students opportunities to practice oral languages, providing learning environment and the application of new teaching strategies such as code switching, Peer and self error correction, short pauses and speech fillers [5]. This clearly prove that when students were provided with more opportunities to express their ideas, feeling or experiences in English, it is very likely that they speaking skill would develop. Furthermore, when students involved in an encouraging group discussion, they would feel safer to talk and exchange ideas would enhance their critical thinking ability.

There were three research questions leading the investigation. However, in this paper two research questions along with the findings will be presented. First, what were the challenges facing the FGD participants?, and second, what positives changes did the participants experience throughout their participation in FGD?

2. METHODS

The present study employed Design-Based Research (henceforth DBR) as it encompassed solving educational problems and producing design principles of classroom instruction in an EFL setting. Simplified DBR steps **[6]** were adopted in this study. These include 1) analysis of practical problems by researchers and practitioners in collaboration; 2) development of solutions informed by existing design principles; 3) iterative cycles of testing and refinement of solutions in practice; and 4) reflection to produce design principles and enhance solution implementation. There were 6 students and 3 lecturers participating in this study and data was collected through participant observation, participants' diary, and group interviews. Thematic analysis steps proposed by were employed to analyze the data **[7].**

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Challenges Encountered during FGD

The first objective of this study was to identify the constraints faced by participants and facilitators during the FGD testing cycles. Based on the analysis of participants' notes during the FGD, we found several problems that they experienced and this was also confirmed from the observations and reflections at the end of each FGD session.

This research is motivated by the learning problems that occur in the English education study program on the campus where researchers teach. Our initial reflection results indicate that the students' speaking ability has not yet reached the expectations set in the study program learning outcomes. One of the main reasons is that there are few opportunities for students to practice communicating in English inside and outside the classroom. The lack of opportunities to practice these abilities makes communicating in English challenging for students. In connection with these empirical findings, many found speaking ability very challenging for English language learners especially in contexts that treat English as a foreign language, as a result of the few opportunities to use English outside the classroom **[8]**. Based on our observations on the implementation of the FGD, we concluded that the FGD was in fact able to provide greater space for the participants to express their opinions or experiences in English.

However, learning to communicate or discuss in English is not a simple matter because there are many layered obstacles that must be faced by foreign language learners. These include fear, not knowing what to speak, lack of motivation to speak, use of mother tongue, focus on accuracy, fear of getting negative comments from teachers **[9]**. In this study we found that one of the participants reported that he felt ashamed to give an opinion or tell his experience. The shame arose because he realized there were other discussion participants who had better English skills than him.

> *"I feel less confident to speak because there are friends who have better English skills than me and often the idea disappears after being in a discussion forum"*

Responding to this attitude, the FGD facilitator tried to encourage the participants to keep trying to express their opinions. The facilitator also tries to convince them that no one will discredit their opinions or their English in the hope that the courage to speak in English is present. Even so, it is not easy to get rid of the shame that already dominates their feelings.

The study also revealed that the majority of participants had difficulty developing their ideas, even though the fear and embarrassment of speaking had begun to diminish after being involved in several FGDs. We observe that they have not been able to talk longer. This is caused by the limited insight or information they have related to the topic of discussion. To overcome this problem, the FGD participants and facilitators concluded that increasing their insights on FGD topics in the future could help them to contribute better in group discussions.

In addition, we also observed that most participants were not yet accustomed to structuring ideas, supporting statements with examples or empirical facts and drawing conclusions. There are two possibilities that become the main cause, first they do not know how to do it or maybe they are not accustomed to giving opinions in English. Therefore, input related to expressions that are commonly used in discussions need to be given in feedback and reflection sessions.

On several occasions, we also observed that some participants were sometimes quiet and seemed confused by the facilitator's questions. From the results of the reflections with the FGD participants, it was revealed that they felt it was difficult to give an opinion about an issue that was poorly understood (unfamiliar with the topics). They acknowledge that it is easier to discuss topics related to personal experience than to discuss issues that have not been experienced directly.

In connection with the findings above, we also see their self-confidence increase when they are asked to talk about experiences or something related to their lives. They seem to be able to develop their ideas despite some grammatical errors, vocabulary selection and pronunciation. In other words, a person's confidence affects their performance when speaking. This is consistent with the view of existing findings **[10]** which confirms that an increase in a person's speaking ability is caused by a sense of self-confidence. However, when they were asked to provide feedback on issues that sounded unfamiliar, there was a sense of doubt or lack of confidence to speak on their faces and the look in their eyes. This is likely to occur because when someone is

asked to talk about their personal experiences, participants only need to remember information (recall) that has been stored in their memory, while providing a view of something that sounds strange requires them to look for information outside their memory, then analyze, construct ideas and draw conclusions.

Regarding the findings above, an FGD participant revealed that he had difficulty speaking while thinking but it was easier to speak after thinking. This empirical fact indicates that the work of thinking is more complex than just remembering. In other words, telling stories about personal experiences tends to be easier than giving views on a topic that is not related to the participant's life experience. This finding also proves that discussion participants will be more productive to talk if they are involved in topics that are directly related to their daily lives. Therefore, we recommend that the selection of topics in the FGD should also involve FGD participants.

From the facilitator's perspective, the main obstacle in implementing FGDs using English is the participants' English language skills which still need to be improved. For example the participants seemed unable to give their full opinion in English. Facilitators also often have to paraphrase questions, and even translate them in Indonesian, so that the participants can understand them. A study reported that the use of mother tongue is often an obstacle in speaking classes **[9]**. To respond to this situation, the facilitator allows them to use their native language in words or sentences that they do not know in English. This is done with the aim that participants do not lose the opportunity to learn to express their opinions due to English language constraints. Nevertheless, the percentage of mother tongue use will gradually decrease as the participants' vocabulary mastery of the FGD increases.

In addition, the FGD facilitator also suggested that the FGD obstacles also arose when participants were asked to practice facilitating the FGD. The biggest obstacle was seen when the student tried to develop questions to make the FGD atmosphere more alive. They are still fixated on the existing questions and have not been able to explore further questions. Indeed, to become a facilitator is not an easy job for most people, especially for students who are just learning to express their opinions. It takes a lot of experience to be a discussion facilitator who can turn on the discussion atmosphere and present a more relaxed atmosphere.

3.2. Changes after Participating in FGD

The second objective of this study is to explore what positive changes occur in participants, especially those related to the development of English speaking skills and critical thinking skills. The FGD activities required participants to try to answer questions raised by the facilitator. These questions encourage participants to think

or to find answers to questions raised by the facilitator. Questions in group discussions can stimulate participants to develop interactive language **[11]**. Answering questions also means giving participants the opportunity to express their ideas, opinions, experiences or feelings.

Based on our observations and reflections with the participants and facilitators, we concluded that the involvement of students in the FGD has made a positive contribution to the ability to communicate orally. This happened because the FGD opened a large space for participants to talk. The more opportunities given to speak, the more their ability to communicate will be honed. This argument confirms that discussions in small groups are able to provide more opportunities for English learners to hone their communication skills and improve their speaking skills effectively **[3]**.

Not just honing the ability to express their views on issues of discussion, FGD participants can also learn to be good listeners and respect the views of others who might be different from their perspective. This positive attitude benefits participants in the form of adding insight and improving behavior in terms of communication. This was revealed in a statement from a FGD participant as follows:

"Through the FGD, we are trained to express our opinions and hear the opinions of others, as well as those who accept different opinions. From these various opinions, we can also learn and broaden our horizons because our opinions with others are not the same. That is, we can get valuable lessons from our discussion partners too. If we have five discussion partners, then we will get five different views on one problem"

Some believe that critically thinking learners are usually happy with what they learn because they see challenges and learning opportunities even from the most difficult things **[12]**. An important lesson learned by FGD participants was the emergence of awareness that the discussion activities that they had been carrying out were more inclined towards debate. Whereas debating has very basic differences from FGDs even though both of them provide space for language learners to express their opinions. This can be seen in the reflection of an FGD participant:

"After joining this FGD, I finally realized that the pattern of discussions that had been carried out with my friends turned out to be wrong. During this time our discussion often ended in debate. The FGD was very interesting for me and gave me a picture of how we should manage a discussion"

In addition to gaining knowledge through FGD, participants also gained experience on how to manage a discussion to be more lively and passionate. The combination of knowledge and experience will eventually be able to foster a sense of courage to argue, because

discussing in small groups can bring a more relaxed learning atmosphere **[3]**.

> *"Through this FGD activity, I gained a lot of knowledge, and it turns out that the practice of discussion that we have been doing so far has not been in accordance with the way the discussion should be. I became more courageous and could express opinions because this FGD taught us how to bring out our ideas"*

An FGD participant revealed that he felt that the FGD activities were fun because the FGD was full of question and answer activities which motivated the participants to channel their aspirations. This joy was born because discussions in small groups present an effective atmosphere **[11]** and support multi-directional communication. In line with this statement, another investigation also proves that students who learn speaking are more motivated by using discussion than those using conventional methods **[13]**. This may be caused by the role of the facilitator often trying to paraphrase the question to make it easier for participants to understand the purpose of the question.

One of the existing reports claims that discussion in small groups can reduce the fear of speaking. This was proven in this study where FGD participants said that they finally had the courage to give an opinion **[2]**. Having the courage to speak in front of the discussion forum is something they believe to be a very significant progress. The courage arises because the FGD provides a space for someone to express his thoughts openly and free from pressure and the consequences of the statement he delivered. This was revealed in a participant's reflection which stated that:

> *"Before, I was quieter when discussing in English, but through the FGD, I felt compelled to speak even though I realized there were mistakes in grammar and pronunciation or limited ideas and vocabulary."*

Another valuable lesson that was revealed from the reflection activities with all participants and FGD facilitators was that discussing would improve our perspective of our fellow human beings. Because small group discussions encourage the exchange of ideas, motivate participants to speak, improve critical thinking skills, open space for socializing and improve one's attitude **[14].** Often time we fail to recognize the extraordinary potential (or excellent thoughts) that are hidden around us because we rarely have the opportunity to listen to the views of others. We are only preoccupied with our own thoughts which often lead us to feel the most right situation. The FGD opens space for discussion and exchange of ideas for individuals involved in it. FGD would enable the participants to further attain all the necessary capacities or knowledge to enhance their critical thinking skills which can be used to tackle everyday life problems. With enhanced critical thinking skills, they be able to think reasonably, find explanations, make decisions, and solve challenges **[15].**

Furthermore, the results of our reflections show that FGDs are believed to be able to improve the behavior of the participants in such a way that they become more humane (humanizing people). This is because FGD encourage and enable them to learn to respect the views of others. A wise person once said that a person's self-esteem lies in how he values fellow human beings. This is different from the debate where we are often trapped in the assumption that our ideas or opinions are better than others. In other words, FGD has the potential to reduce one's ego. Not only that, the results of reflection with participants and facilitators brought us to an awareness that the FGD has the potential to hone our sensitivity to a problem (raising awareness), and lead us to see the problem from diverse perspectives and consideration on which they can resort before deciding an action **[16]**. Furthermore, with this sensitivity and comprehensive view, we are able to identify various alternative potential solutions that can help us determine the best solution of the one problem we are facing. With regard to the findings above holds that discussing not only helps us analyze facts, but also helps develop openness of thought, share insights and reveal positive values and attitudes **[17]**.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study sought to investigate the challenges facing the FGD participants and positive changes they experienced throughout their participation. The findings of this study revealed that the participants of the FGD found it a challenge to speak their ideas in a group discussion. Some of them felt shy and anxious to express their thoughts. They also reported that talking about unfamiliar topics is challenging compared to those of their personal lives. Furthermore, the FGD participants were observed not being able to fully speak in English due to some reasons. They were also still unable to extend speeches caused by limited knowledge about the discussed topics.

This study also uncovered a number of positive changes participants experienced throughout their participation in the FGD. First, they learned that their confidence to speak in English was increased. Second, they become more aware that FGD enabled them to explore their and others' potential thoughts making them view discussion not only enriching but also invaluable. They also learned that discussion made them become more aware of the importance of respecting others and the value of listening each to others' perspectives to solve real-life problems. Above all, the most important aspect learned by the participants was that FGD has changed the way they see themselves and others.

Finally, the findings of this study may not be transferable to other contexts, and generalize as the participants were only a few. It is expected that future studies will expand the use of FGD in wider scopes in order to assess its effectiveness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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