

ABSTRACT

Koski, G. Listening to learn: Using focus group interviews in cross-cultural settings (2009)

This qualitative study used a mixed-method research design to investigate modifications needed to focus group methodology for use in southern Sudan. Data from five individual interviews informed the design and conduct of three focus group interviews. Participant and observer feedback from the focus groups verified data from the individual interviews and provided further data on factors important to the use of focus groups for quality research in this context. Key research for this study came from Krueger and Casey (2009), Morgan (1993), and Patton (2002). Findings indicated that this methodology does produce quality data when accommodation is made for cultural norms for group discussion. Answering this question was important for me because I wanted to use focus groups to gather data for a needs assessment project for the planning of an EFL program in southern Sudan.

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LISTENING TO LEARN: USING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS
IN CROSS-CULTURAL SETTINGS

By

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A person is not a person without other people.
Zulu proverb (Richmond & Gestrin, 1998)

In this study, I explore the use of the focus group interview in an international context. I want to know factors important to the effective use of focus group interviews in a cultural setting outside of the United States. A focus group is an effective research tool when it provides for the collection of quality data for research analysis. This capstone will address one specific component of a needs assessment project for program planning in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, namely the use of the focus group interview as a data gathering tool in the EFL context of southern Sudan. The needs assessment as a whole is beyond the scope of this capstone. However, this study may contribute to the literature on the use of the focus group interview as a quality research method in EFL program planning and course design. In this chapter, I present topics related to using focus groups in a global context.

Purpose of the Research

The focus group interview is “a research interviewing process specifically designed to uncover insights from a small group of subjects.” (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004, p. 391). Although this interview technique is widely associated with market research, it had its origins in the social sciences in the work of Robert Merton. While

Merton (1987) agreed that this group interviewing method is beneficial for market research, he also recognized its potential for acquiring a larger sociological and psychological understanding of the broader human experience. For focus group methodology, the sphere of human experience has extended beyond market research to include academia and the public/nonprofit sector as well. Use of this research method has not only spread across disciplines but also across geographical and cultural borders. The use of focus group interviews is expanding internationally. Kruger and Casey (2009) note the increasing popularity of focus groups worldwide in determining needs and potential solutions in relation to community development and issues such as poverty, health, and education.

In referring to the use of focus groups globally, Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) alert researchers to the potential impact of culture on the method. They assert that as a result of the influence of culture on human behavior research methods may not work equally well in all cultures. Using focus groups internationally may require researchers to think in new ways to appropriately adapt this technique to the context of the research (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Researchers who are insiders in a culture may know implicitly what adaptations might be required and appropriate in order to use focus groups for meaningful data collection in that culture. However, what would an outsider to the culture need to know? The purpose of this capstone is to find out what modification may be needed in order to use focus group interviews for quality research in southern Sudan. This study may add to the literature on the cross-cultural use of focus group interviews as a research method.

Rationale for the Research

Pennycock (1994) observes that English and English language teaching seem to have a role to play everywhere in the world from the broader scope of international politics to the details of ordinary life. The course designer may easily discern appropriate goals and objectives for an English as a Second Language (ESL) course where, generally, learner need is for acculturation into the English-speaking host society (Graves, 1996, 2000). In an EFL setting, however, in which the general population is non-English-speaking, Graves (1996) notes that it may be more challenging to identify learner needs or to establish the role of English language teaching relevant to the realities of people's lives.

Research carried out for language program planning, such as needs assessment, can provide a wealth of information valuable for developing programs relevant to the needs of potential students. The usefulness of the data collected, however, may be affected by the choice of research method. Choosing an appropriate method is critical to the collection of meaningful data (Graves, 1996). I believe this may be especially important in EFL settings where program developers or teachers are likely to be outsiders working in international contexts. I believe it would be important for the course designer to consider the compatibility of a research method with the cultural context of the program and to be aware of the possible need to contextualize a research methodology for cultural appropriateness. It would also be important for the researcher to choose a method likely to yield emic data, data that reveals the point of view of someone from inside the host culture.

My perspective is that the focus group interview may be well-suited to contextualization in order to render it an appropriate method for carrying out research in an international setting. In this study, I investigate what adaptation may be necessary to make focus groups a useful research method in southern Sudan.

Emic Perspective and EFL Program Planning

With reference to language programs, Ashworth (1985) stresses that planning is paramount to the development of good programs. The starting point in the planning process is establishing a need for a program. Investigating that need by carrying out a needs assessment, alternately called a needs analysis, is the foundational information-gathering step that provides data for planning a language program (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). The information gathered can be quantitative, such as the size of the potential student body, or qualitative, such as the attitude of potential learners toward the target language (Ashworth, 1985). As EFL practitioners are likely to be outsiders in the countries where they teach, it is important for them to seek input from cultural insiders for the planning of relevant language programs. Researchers can bring an emic or insider perspective to research for language program planning by choosing qualitative methods. The focus group interview is a method that can be used to gather data on participants' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward the research topic (Krueger, 1994).

Background of the Researcher

On January 9, 2005, after 21 years of civil war, the government of Sudan in the North and the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the South signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (United Nations, 2005). Consequently, many non-

governmental organizations (NGOs) are currently working in southern Sudan to rebuild infrastructure and improve the lives of southerners in areas such as education and health care. The needs assessment project mentioned above was the initiative of a non-profit humanitarian organization with a history of work in Sudan reaching back to the 1930's. Following the signing of the peace accord, personnel from this organization made multiple visits to southern Sudan in order to discern how they might best address felt needs of the population. Interviews with government officials, community and church leaders, Sudanese of the Diaspora, and local residents identified an eagerness for English training that seemed to permeate every sector of society. Those who already knew some English wanted to improve their skills in the language and those who did not know English wanted to learn it. This desire for English teaching was not surprising considering the history of the use of English in southern Sudan and its current role in the region.

It was during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule in Sudan, from 1898-1956, that Britain introduced English into the country (Collins, 2008). Arabic, on the other hand, has a long linguistic history in Sudan beginning well before the 14th century and continuing to the present (Baraka, 1984; Beshir, 1969). Arabic is the official language of Sudan and the language of wider communication while English is the official second language (Hopkins, 2007).

Within the country, the use of English can be placed on a continuum with English use strongest in the South and weakest in the North. In addition to the history of English usage by the colonial administration predominantly in the South, there are several other

factors contributing to the more prevalent use of English in southern Sudan. One factor is the cultural and religious influence of Arabic which is strong in the North but weaker in the South. Another factor is that there were periods in the history of Sudan when English was the language of education in the South (Baraka, 1984; Beshir, 1969). The geographical proximity of the southern Sudanese states to the English-speaking countries of East Africa is another factor. For the South, communication, business, trade, and travel is easier with these countries than with the North. A fourth is the return of refugees from these countries. Many of the Sudanese who fled the country during the years of civil war took refuge in neighboring English-speaking countries. With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, many of these refugees are returning home, mainly settling in the South. Additionally, since 2005 the Government of South Sudan has sought to establish English as the lingua franca in southern Sudan to replace Arabic.

The possibility of addressing this desire for English teaching resonated with the goals of this organization, especially as they had been involved in significant educational work in the country prior to the war. Therefore, the organization's leadership agreed to research the viability of developing an English teaching program in an area of the South where they had previously worked. The first step in their research was the needs assessment project.

In 2008, I was asked to do the needs assessment on behalf of the organization for the planning of an English language program in an urban community in southern Sudan. In doing the needs assessment I sought to answer questions such as what opportunities there might be for teaching English, who the potential learners were and how they wanted

to use English. The subject of this capstone came out of specific questions I had as I thought about actually carrying out the assessment. What tool(s) would yield the data I needed? What tool(s) would be appropriate given the cultural setting of the research? As an outsider, could I gather valid data?

Focus group interviews had been used in fruitful research in Kenya (Koski, 2000). I wondered if focus groups might be an appropriate research method in another African context. Would this method be suitable for research in southern Sudan? Initially, I would need to verify that group discussion was a concept present in southern Sudanese culture. If so, I would then need to investigate factors that would contribute to designing and conducting focus groups in southern Sudan in such a way that they would yield quality research data.

Role of the Researcher

From the perspective of Feldman, Bell & Berger (2003), access to research participants is best accomplished through the building and maintaining of relationships. Relationships were of paramount importance in providing access to participants and enabling me to accomplish this study. The initial invitation I received to participate in the EFL needs assessment project came as a result of my relationships with members of the project's sponsoring agency. These relationships had been developed and maintained over many years of working together in East Africa.

As a representative of the sponsoring agency, I had access to study participants because the agency had developed a good working relationship with local authorities and good rapport with the local community in southern Sudan. It was because of these

relationships that I was accorded a level of trust and credibility by the community that allowed me to gather the data I needed for this study.

Living and working in East Africa for over three decades had taught me the value of approaching an unfamiliar culture as a learner. Therefore, I made an effort to enter this new community with a learner attitude. As soon as I arrived at my research location, I began engaging individuals in informal conversations to help me learn about the community and also to help me find potential participants for this study. I was able to do this largely because of the positive relationships agency co-workers had developed with individuals in the local community. The trust and respect my colleagues had earned was extended to me also and enabled me to develop collaborative relationships with local southern Sudanese which proved invaluable in carrying out my research (Hinnink, 2007). As I did my research, I also had a responsibility to maintain that trust and respect and endeavor to strengthen those positive relationships.

Research Biases

I am aware of two biases in relation to this study. First, I came into the study favorably disposed toward the focus group interview as a research method that can be used effectively in an international setting. I believe that it is possible to contextualize this methodology without compromising the scientific rigor of the method. Second, as I do not speak the official language of the country – which is also the language of wider communication – nor the local vernacular languages, I relied heavily on non-native English speakers as informants and participants for this study.

Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that are important to the design and conduct of focus group interviews as a quality research method in a global context. How might a researcher appropriately contextualize the focus group method while following good practice in the scientific application of the method? Specifically, I want to know:

- 1) What constitutes an effective focus group in a southern Sudanese context?
- 2) What factors contribute to the collection of quality data when using focus groups in this context?
- 3) Do contributions of focus group participants vary as a result of insider or outsider facilitators?

Summary

English as a foreign language program planners and teachers of English as a foreign language are likely to be outsiders to the cultures in which they are working. In doing research for course design, it is important to choose methods appropriate to the cultural context of the program. It would be expedient for these professionals as researchers to be aware of specific modification needed, if any, to increase the efficacy of a research tool for use in the research context. It would also be important for course designers as outsiders in the research context to use research methods that yield emic data. This study hopes to show what modifications may be needed to use focus groups as a quality research method in an international setting. Specifically, I want to investigate what modifications may be needed for the effective use of the focus group interview as a research method in southern Sudan.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One, I set forth my research question. I provided the rationale for my research as well as relevant background information. In Chapter Two, I present a review of literature germane to my research. Topics addressed are the focus group interview as a research method and the use of this method internationally. Additionally, I consider the use of focus groups in collectivistic societies and the use of focus groups for gathering data that provide researchers with an emic perspective of the research topic. I also consider cross-cultural communication and focus groups. In Chapter Three, I describe the mixed-methods research design of this study in which I used data collected from individual interviews to inform the design and conduct of focus group interviews. In Chapter Four, I present my data. The findings of this study that focus groups can be used cross-culturally for meaningful research with appropriate cultural modification are discussed in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of this research is to investigate factors that are important in designing and conducting focus group interviews for quality data collection in southern Sudan. Literature relevant to this purpose is presented in this chapter. The focus group interview as a research method is discussed as is the use of this method in international settings. The group orientation of the focus group interview and the collectivistic nature of African culture are addressed. The emic perspective of focus group data is considered. The chapter closes with a discussion of intercultural communication and focus groups.

The Focus Group Interview as a Research Method

Focus group interviews are “group discussions among carefully selected individuals guided by a skilled moderator who follows a well-constructed but loose and flexible interview guide.” (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007, p. 67). Group size usually ranges from six to eight participants chosen on the basis of a shared experience relative to the interview topic. Additionally, compatibility among group members is desirable to enhance the free flow of discussion. Stewart, et al. (2007) assert that the moderator plays a central role in ensuring that the group discussion flows smoothly. Krueger (1994) differentiates between the terms *interviewer* and *moderator* in relation to focus groups. The term *interviewer* suggests a dyadic question/answer format between

interviewer and interviewee. However, *moderator* highlights the function of facilitating or guiding participants in a discussion. Krueger explains that it is the moderator who nurtures the conversation of participants into a productive group discussion. The moderator may work with an assistant who oversees the logistical aspects of holding the interview and also takes thorough notes of the discussion.

The moderator follows an interview guide to ensure research topics are addressed during the session. Merton (1946) states that the guide also enhances comparability of data between focus groups. Open-ended questions are preplanned and arranged in a logical sequence from more general at the beginning of the session to more specific as the session continues. Interview sessions typically last from one to two hours. As participants interact during the session, they are not obliged to agree or disagree, reach consensus, solve problems, or make decisions. Rather, the goal of this interaction is to enable the researcher to learn by listening to participants sharing their experiences and attitudes on a given topic (Morgan, 1998). The purpose of focus group interviews is to collect quality data in a social setting which allows people to compare and contrast their views with the views of others (Patton, 2002).

Focus groups may be held in homes, offices, or community rooms, or via conference telephone or the Internet. The venue may be a facility especially designed for focus group interviews with one-way mirrors and viewing rooms for observing group interaction and with equipment for audio- and/or videotaping sessions. However, Krueger (1994) asserts that, as helpful as good facilities and technology can be, the true indicator of a quality focus group is the quality of the discussion. Researchers usually

plan to conduct multiple focus groups. Conducting a series of focus groups yields multiple perspectives and increases the validity of the data (Patton, 2002). The number of focus groups needed depends on the number required to reach the point at which no new information is forthcoming from the discussions. When group discussions no longer yield new data or offer further understanding of the topic, saturation has been achieved. Glaser and Strauss (1967) hold that the total number of groups is not as important as is fully covering or saturating the discussion topic (as cited in Morgan, 1998).

Focus group interviews yield qualitative data that is analyzed according to the purpose of the study. The unit of analysis for focus group data is the group rather than individuals within the group (Perceman, 2006). When analyzing focus group data, researchers look for themes that emerge from the group discussions. Focus group discussions are usually transcribed. Analysis is best done by the researcher using the transcriptions plus additional available data such as notes of the observers. Findings are reported in keeping with the goals of the research.

Focus groups are used as a data collection tool to inform decision making for a variety of purposes. Focus groups are used in program and product planning and evaluation, and for identifying problems and assessing needs. They are used to explore concepts, discover information, and define topics for further study. Focus groups can be used alone as the primary data source for a study or together with other qualitative or quantitative methods (Vaugh, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). Flores and Alonso (1995) used focus groups as a solo methodology to investigate teacher perspectives of educational reform in Spain. Researchers in Thailand used focus groups to identify

language appropriate for use in their survey instrument (Fuller, Edwards, Vorakitphokarorn & Sermsri, 1993).

Researchers recognize that just as other research tools have their strengths and limitations so does the focus group interview method (Hinnink, 2007; Krueger, 1994; McKay, 2006; Morgan, 1997; Stewart, et al., 2007). Strengths include the social orientation of the procedure that creates an environment for data collection that is more natural for participants than clinical, experimental settings may be. The discussion format allows participants to share their views on the research topic, refining opinions, and expanding explanations as the discussion proceeds. The data is enriched by the group interaction resulting in deeper insights and breadth of understanding for the researcher. Within the group context the researcher can interact directly with participants to clarify responses, ask questions to follow-up emerging ideas, and observe respondents' nonverbal behavior. The interaction of participants and the probing of the moderator can yield substantial amounts of valuable data on the discussion topic in a short amount of time. Also, the interaction of participants may help ensure the accuracy of the data. Kumar (1987) cites the example of a landowner who admitted, after good-humored questioning by fellow participants, to owning 300 acres of land instead of the 30 (the legal maximum) which he had originally reported.

Limitations include the need for a skilled moderator who is able to keep discussions on topic and data relevant. Also, there is potential for a moderator to influence participants' responses and interaction. Participants may be inclined to conformity in responding, or, within the group context, may voice more radical views

than they might in an individual interview. Other limitations concern logistics and time. Gathering participants may be challenging and participation may be time consuming if travel time is considered together with session time. There is reduced confidentiality among group members which may limit choice of research topic to non-sensitive issues. The large amounts of qualitative data may be difficult to analyze and report.

Focus group interviews are used to gather qualitative data. Krippendorf (2004) differentiates between *emic* and *etic* data (as cited in Stewart, et al., 2007). In relation to focus groups, emic data originate from respondents within the group while etic data are imposed by the researcher from outside of the group. McKay defines an emic perspective as “an insider’s view of a particular culture or community. . . . in contrast to an etic perspective in which researchers interpret what they see largely from their own perspective” (2006, p. 78). Merriam (1998) states that emic refers to the point of view of the participant as insider and etic to that of the researcher as outsider. Stewart, et al. (2007) claim that it is difficult to find research that is purely emic or entirely etic and suggest that research methods lie along a continuum with some nearer the emic end and some the etic. They assert that focus group data are closer to the emic end of the continuum because individuals respond to the discussion topic using their own words to create their own categories and associations. However, questions chosen by researchers may bring an etic element into focus group interviews.

As a research tool that yields emic data, focus groups may provide valuable information to EFL practitioners who engage in research for program planning.

According to Krueger (1994), focus group interviews are well suited for providing insight

into the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of participants. Focus group interviews could be used to discover participants' attitudes and opinions about learning English, for example.

The beginning of the focus group interview is attributed to the work of social scientist Robert Merton in the early 1940's in the United States. The publication that emerged from his efforts, *The focused interview: A manual of problems and procedures* by Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall (1990) remains the seminal work on focus group interviews (Patton, 2002). Although not originally accepted by the academic community, this new interview technique found a welcome in the 1950's in the field of market research where it continues to be used effectively in product design, advertising, and sales. In the 1980's, academics began to give serious consideration to the use of focus groups in qualitative research. More recently, the public/nonprofit sector has embraced this research method. The use of focus groups is expanding across disciplines with the result that this methodology is being used in more varied settings (Hinnink, 2007). Stewart, et al. (2007) note that the use of focus groups as a research tool is increasing globally.

The Use of Focus Groups in International Contexts

Focus group interviews have been effectively used for research purposes in international contexts (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992; Fuller, et al., 1993; Hinnink, 2007; Koski, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1993; Wolff, Knodel & Sittitrai, 1993). Researchers have used this technique to conduct academic research outside of the United States as well as with international students in America (Dushku, 2000; Flores &

Alonso, 1995; Ho, 2006; Zhu & Flaity, 2005). For researchers working in the setting of another culture, general handbooks on focus group interviewing provide broad guidelines such as respecting cultural preferences or constraints with regard to gender, age groups, social status, or appropriate foods and venues, and seeking advice from local researchers and others familiar with the context (Edmunds, 1999; Krueger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Stewart, et al., 2007). For example, in a study conducted in Thailand, researchers worked as a cross-cultural team. The study benefited from the researchers' combined cross-cultural insights and language knowledge (Fuller, et al., 1993).

However, while researchers report findings, few address issues arising from the application of the focus group method in an international context. In an article on focus group interviews used in research on English language teaching programs in Albania, Dushku (2000) refers to the practical implications of working within the constraints of political, social, and economic unrest. The situation impacted access to participants when many either moved to other parts of the country or emigrated. Dushku outlines strategies used to surmount these difficulties and carry on with the study. In a study of household crowding in Bangkok, Thailand, Fuller, et al. (1993) describe strategies for resolving logistical concerns of recruiting for and staging interviews when few participants had access to automobiles or telephones. Aware that in Thai culture there is deference to the elderly, Fuller, et al. (1993) intentionally set an age range limit of 10 years for each focus group and used different age ranges in different groups. In a study on marriage in Thai society, Pramualrantana, Havanon and Knodel (1983) discuss the importance of defining key concepts before beginning data collection (as cited in Kumar, 1987). In describing

their use of focus groups among the Bangladeshi community in the UK, Fallon & Brown (2002) recount positive and negative experiences using moderators recommended by the community. Krueger & Casey (2009) tell of unexpected, but culturally important questions posed to a researcher by those with power in the community to sanction the study. Hinnink (2007) suggests possible venue and seating arrangements acceptable to various cultures and research contexts.

Researchers willing to describe practical strategies used in applying this method and insights gained from doing so may enhance good practice for the effective use of focus groups across cultures. There is a lack of such description in focus group literature. Hinnink (2007) urges more transparency when reporting on the conduct of focus group research in order that researchers might gain confidence in applying this technique in varied research contexts while maintaining the integrity of the method. This study seeks to address this concern.

Focus Groups and Collectivistic Societies

Triandis (1995) conceptualizes individualism and collectivism in terms of the patterns of relationship of individuals with each other and with their communities.

Triandis sets forth a general definition of *individualism* as

a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others. (1995, p. 2)

Triandis offers a general definition of *collectivism* as

a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives. (1995, p. 2)

Hofstede (2001) states that individualism and collectivism are two extremes of one aspect of national culture. He defines these two attributes in the context of a society as a whole:

Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only.

Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (2001, p. 225)

Triandis (1995) asserts that tendencies toward individualism and collectivism can be found in every individual and every society and that, to some degree, each culture has elements of both attributes. Bennett (1998) refers to the general tendency of a population within a culture toward individualism or collectivism and pictures the distribution of that tendency among the population as a bell-shaped curve. For example, in a society described as individualistic, 98% of the population would exhibit a tendency toward individualism while 2% of the population on the edge of the societal norm would have a collectivistic orientation. Conversely, in a collectivistic society, 98% of the population would tend toward collectivism and 2% toward individualism.

The word *individualistic* is often used to characterize the culture of the United States (Kohls, 2001). Bennett (1998) asserts that American self-perception is one of independence and self-reliance. According to Stewart, Danielian and Foster (1998), the concept of individualism in America affects cultural attitudes toward groups. Because Americans perceive themselves primarily as individuals, they fear that the essence of their individuality may be lost within the dynamics of a group. Nevertheless, from within the context of this individualistic culture, the focus group interview as a research tool has emerged.

In contrast to the individualistic nature of cultures such as the United States are cultures which are more collectivistic. Indeed, Hofstede (2001) states that the majority of the world's cultures are collectivistic. In collectivistic societies, a member's identity is generated from outside the self. In these cultures identity is found in roles, groups, family, clan, caste, or the larger society itself (Kohls, 2001; Roberts, 1979; Stewart, et al., 1998). Rather than defining self in terms of personal goals, achievements, or success, members of these cultures draw their identity from their relationships to groups. Within the context of an individualistic society, the focus group interview has proven to be an effective research tool. It is not surprising that this research method has also been used successfully in collectivistic societies (Patton, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Group Orientation in Focus Group Interviews

The name *focus group interview* underscores a significant characteristic of this method, that it is a group method. Frey and Fontana (1993) assert that group interviews take advantage of group dynamics while Krueger and Casey (2009) note that group

members influence each other and are influenced themselves as they listen and respond to each other. The group orientation encourages the sharing of thoughts and feelings.

Lederman (1990) speaks of the synergy created by the group that is greater than the total of the individual responses. Rubin and Rubin add:

In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off of one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion. (1995, p. 140)

Likewise, Albrecht, Johnson and Walther (1993) state that participants together co-construct meaning as they engage in discussion. The interaction between participants provides a dynamic integral to the method. Morgan (1997) affirms that the intentional use of group interaction is a distinctive feature of focus groups, yielding data that might not emerge aside from the interaction of the participants. Group interaction may encourage clarification or elaboration of ideas or opinions. As participants process their responses through this group interaction, the data is contextualized and personalized within the group.

Krueger (1994) states that the focus group interview is a socially oriented research method. Albrecht, et al. (1993) identify focus groups as social events and suggest that this method may produce data that are more contextually relevant than data collected using methods that are more asocial, methods in which participants do not interact. Asocial methods suggest activities in which an individual alone is engaged, activities not based on group interaction. Examples of research conducted in asocial settings may

include individual interviews, paper surveys, or questionnaires. The distinction between social events and asocial settings may be significant when considering the choice of culturally appropriate research method within the context of an individualistic or collectivistic society. Research methods staged in asocial settings may be compatible with values of individualistic cultures. Collectivistic cultures may favor social events. The group orientation of the focus group interview may make this tool an appealing data collection method for use in a collectivistic society.

Madriz (2000) refers to focus groups as a collectivistic research method. From the perspective of a feminist researcher, Madriz explains that for participants who may be uncomfortable in a one-on-one interview, the focus group setting creates a safe environment for sharing experiences and attitudes. In the context of collectivistic cultures, participants may feel more at ease in focus groups than in individual interviews. For example, while doing research in India, Parameswaran (2001) was obliged to modify her study design upon realizing that she would need to interview participants in groups before they would agree to be interviewed individually (as cited in Patton, 2002). In undertaking research for program planning and course design, EFL practitioners who choose methods compatible with the collectivistic values of the host culture and of research participants, such as focus groups, may enhance the quality of data collected.

Collectivism in African Culture

When referring to sub-Saharan Africa, many scholars believe that it is appropriate to talk about African culture as a unified concept in spite of the multiethnic nature of the continent (Sanda, 1979). Maquet (1972) calls this unity of culture *Africanity* which is

grounded in a similarity of life experiences and cultural traits shared by various African societies. One aspect of Africanity is the recognition of the supremacy of the group over the individual (Maquet, 1972). Richmond and Gestrin (1998) explain that Africans see themselves as belonging to a larger community. As they share with and care for each other, they are contributing to the greater good of the group. John Makhene of the South African Broadcasting Corporation succinctly states, “African [black] culture is a ‘we’ culture based on the community and communal experience.... Western [white] culture on the other hand is an ‘I’ culture – it’s far more individualistic.” (as cited in Richmond & Gestrin, 1998, p. 8). Hofstede (2001) describes African cultures as collectivistic.

African oral literature underscores the collectivistic value system of African societies which is shared across the continent (Sanda, 1979). For example, proverbs drawn from different ethnic groups echo the values of collectivism. The Zulu proverb at the beginning of this paper is one example. This proverb underscores the group as the source of an individual’s identity. Another example is the Swahili proverb that says, “One is thin gruel, many are thick corn mush.” In the Swahili language, thin gruel is *uji*, a watery breakfast porridge while thick corn mush is *ugali*, the staple food in the diet of many Swahili speakers. The meaning of this proverb suggests that one person alone lacks substance, but solidity is found in a group. “What belongs to me is destroyable by water or fire; what belongs to us is destroyable by neither water nor fire” is a proverb from the Vais people of West Africa. This saying reinforces the Vais belief in the vulnerability of the individual and the invincibility of the group. The Ashanti people of Ghana have a proverb that states, “The family is a crowd” (Richmond & Gestrin, 1998).

For the Ashanti, the concept of family encompasses more than a nuclear family to include the extended family and the village.

The social orientation of the focus group interview may resonate with the value of the group found in African societies. Patton reports experiences from Tanzania and Burkina Faso that underscore “cross-cultural differences in valuing individual versus group interactions” (2002, p. 391). In the context of a structured research setting, participants demonstrated a marked preference for group interviews. Patton found that only as he engaged in an informal activity with an individual, such as walking somewhere together, was he able to get an individual interview. Additionally, in spite of efforts to formally schedule one-on-one interviews, Patton tells of arriving at the designated venue to find whole groups assembled to meet him. Similarly, an anticipated individual interview with an African chief turned out to be a group dialogue with the whole village. As these examples demonstrate, focus groups may be a contextually appropriate data collection method for use in the collectivistic African context.

Intercultural Communication and Focus Groups

Bennett (1998) believes that the starting point for effective communication between people from different cultures is to understand, appreciate, and respect the reality of difference between cultures. Asante, Newmark, and Blake (1979) emphasize that, in the context of intercultural communication, researchers must give priority to observing before drawing conclusions about how a culture shares information. Bauman and Sherzer (1989) contend that it is of vital importance to intentionally seek to discover the unique characteristics of a culture’s communication system.

Krueger and Casey (2009) advise that focus group interviews ought to follow the norm for group discussion in the research context. Ensuring that the focus group format feels natural to participants may enhance collection of quality data. Simon (1999) emphasizes the importance of confirming that group discussions are indeed part of the culture. She reports that in doing research in Cambodia, her group found that the idea of a group discussion was a foreign concept. Their study yielded limited results, even though a native speaker moderated the focus groups.

Blake (1979) cautions that even though the researcher may be able to speak the local language it is imperative to also understand how native speakers enhance communication. For example, speakers may use stories, parables, and poetry. Even when researcher and subject speak the same language understanding the underlying structure of communication is important. An awareness of how a particular culture uses language is paramount for clear cross-cultural communication (Bauman & Sherzer, 1989). The differences in how cultures define and use words may also interfere with communication. Patton (2002) describes the confusion he experienced at an international conference, conducted in English, until he realized that the word *policy* was being used the way he as an American used the word *program*. In an EFL context, practitioners may be doing research in English among non-native English speakers, or in the national language. It would be important for researchers to be aware of potential differences in communication styles and word use of participants.

Furthermore, Edward Hall (1976) states that context can have a significant impact on communication. In some cultures, the listener understands the speaker's meaning

from the physical context and his own experience; the verbal message itself carries minimal meaning. Hall labels this a high-context communication or message. A low-context communication is one in which the verbal message carries the majority of the meaning while the physical setting and the hearer contribute minimally. DeVito (2006) states that collectivistic cultures tend to be high-context. Observers serving with moderators on focus group teams working in collectivistic societies can contribute to the quality of data collection by bringing to the team an awareness of this aspect of participant interaction. This would be especially true if observers were insiders in the culture.

Summary

Teaching English as a foreign language most likely occurs in an international context. To ensure developing programs and courses relevant to learner contexts, it is important for EFL practitioners to engage in research for program or course design. It is also expedient for researchers to choose methods that are contextually suitable for quality data collection. Focus group methodology is a research method used in international settings. The social orientation of focus groups may render this research method especially suitable for use in the collectivistic cultures that comprise much of the context for teaching English as a foreign language. The strength of the focus group interview as a tool for gathering emic data may make it a wise choice for providing practitioners with insider perspectives helpful for program planning in cross-cultural settings. To enhance meaningful data collection and analysis, researchers need to be aware of challenges intercultural communication may bring to cross-cultural research.

The literature confirms that the use of focus group methodology for research in international settings is increasing. Researchers have begun to describe how they contextualize focus group methods when working across cultures. However, in general, there continues to be a lack of description in the literature of the application of the focus group method in various cultural contexts. Hinnink (2007) asserts that focus group methodology is often given only limited attention in research documents, with minimal reporting of how the method was practically applied. This study speaks to that concern and may add to the literature on the cross-cultural use of the focus group interview as a research method. The methodology for the investigation of my research question is presented in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of my research is to study factors that are important to the design and conduct of focus group interviews in southern Sudan. Questions guiding this research are: 1) What constitutes an effective focus group in the context of southern Sudan? 2) What factors contribute to the collection of quality data when using focus groups in this context? 3) Do contributions of focus group participants vary as a result of insider or outsider facilitators? This chapter presents the methods I used to explore these questions. Following an explanation of my choice of research paradigm, I describe the methods and procedures I used for data collection. Then, data analysis is explained and verification discussed. Finally, ethical considerations of this study are presented.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

This study follows a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research is a research model that seeks to understand a situation within a natural, real-world context (Bryman, 2008; McKay, 2006; Merriam, 1998). Given that the purpose of this study is to explore relevant factors for effective use of focus groups in a cross-cultural setting, several characteristics of the qualitative research model make it an appropriate choice for the study (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research looks at reality through a holistic lens

and seeks understanding of that reality through the perspective of the insider rather than that of the researcher. In light of the cross-cultural context of the setting in southern Sudan, this characteristic makes the qualitative research model particularly suited to this study. The insider, or emic, perspective of this study is found in participant responses to interview questions during the individual interviews and in participant and observer feedback on the focus group interview process. In qualitative research, the researcher plays a pivotal role in the actual collection and analysis of data. For this study, the researcher conducted the individual and the focus group interviews. The researcher also analyzed the data and wrote up the findings. On-site fieldwork is an important component of qualitative research and was an essential part of this study.

Data Collection

Merriam (1998) states that in qualitative research the primary source of data is often interviews. The data sources for this study were individual interviews and focus group interviews.

Data Collection through Individual Interviews

Patton (2002) observes that interviewing allows the researcher to learn more from an individual than what can be outwardly observed. Components of the one-on-one interview include the interviewer, the interviewee, the interview guide, and an appropriate venue (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam, 1998). The interviewer may tape record the interview, take notes, or do both. In conducting an interview, the researcher must have a sense of rapport with the respondent and neutrality toward the

responses (Patton, 2002). Kvale & Brinkmann refer to neutrality as “deliberate naïveté,” an openness to receive whatever data the interview yields (2009, p. 30).

Interview type can vary along a continuum relative to structure from highly structured to semi-structured to unstructured (Merriam, 1998). While the structured interview is mainly found in quantitative research, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are primarily used in qualitative research (Bryman, 2008). Rubin and Rubin (1995) conceptualize the continuum of interview types from semi-structured to unstructured as a family of interviews exemplifying the philosophy of qualitative research which seeks to discover participants’ perspectives without the imposition of researchers’ views. Questions used in qualitative research are primarily open-ended to allow respondents to answer according to their knowledge and experience.

Data Collection through Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interview is a qualitative research method in which a moderator facilitates group interaction to explore a research topic (Bryman, 2008; Ho, 2006; Krueger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Lederman, 1990; McKay, 2006; Morgan, 1993). Krueger and Casey (2009) report that on occasion, when seeking to put participants at ease, they refer to the focus group as a small group discussion. However, they further define the focus group interview as “a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (2009, p. 2). They describe the focus group as a special kind of group having a unique purpose, a specific size, a particular composition, and a set procedure.

A focus group is usually made up of six to eight people who share a common characteristic pertinent to the discussion topic of the group and who come together to listen and share ideas on the topic. The researcher creates a safe environment for participants and moderates the discussion of the topic of interest. Usually the researcher will conduct a series of focus group interviews and analyze the data collected from the multiple groups. Critics of focus groups say that group members influence the responses of each other while proponents claim this as one of the advantages of this method.

Procedure

Participants

Participants in this study were adult Sudanese men and women. Specifically, I interviewed four men and one woman for the individual interviews. One respondent was the community development officer of a non-governmental organization (NGO). The second was a secondary school teacher and also an employee of an NGO. The third was a pastor who was also a primary school teacher, and the fourth was a pastor and adjunct university instructor. The fifth was a former secondary school teacher who at the time of the interview was a department head in the state education office. I chose interviewees based on several factors including recommendations from colleagues, availability of the individual for the interview, the individual's English language proficiency, the emic perspective the individual might bring to the interview, and gender. Merriam (1998) asserts that, when using interviews in qualitative research, an important consideration in identifying interview candidates is the contribution the individual may be able to make in furthering the understanding of the research topic. Merriam (1998) also suggests that

informal discussions with potential participants may lead to discovering or confirming those to include in an individual interview. Prior to selecting interviewees, I was able to engage each prospective participant in one or more informal conversations. The informal conversations were important in helping me sense the potential contribution of the person to the research. These conversations also offered me the opportunity to introduce myself to the interviewees and begin building relationships with them.

Participants in the focus group interviews included ten men and five women. Focus group A was comprised of university students, five men and one woman. Focus group B consisted of five men who were students in an evening English class. One participant was a self-employed contractor, one was a tailor, one a community health worker, one a civil servant, and one a second-year university student. Focus group C was made up of four women who were all professional educators and who each headed up a department of the state education office. Stewart, et al. (2007) state that choosing focus group participants is a crucial step in meaningful data collection and that criteria for participant selection should be based on relevancy to the research topic. Factors guiding the choice of focus group participants included data from individual interviews, potential to contribute to the understanding of the discussion topic, availability and willingness to participate, English language proficiency, and gender.

Setting

The setting for this study was a mid-sized town in southern Sudan. As this town serves as the capital of the state in which it is located, it houses many government offices including the state office of education. A branch of the national university and a teaching

hospital are also located here. As the town is situated on the Nile River, it is a bustling port as well.

Arabic is the language of wider communication in this urban center, as it is in Sudan as a whole. In general, English use is limited among the general population of the town. Those using English include Sudanese who had their primary and secondary education in English and Sudanese who have been refugees outside of the country and have now returned home. English is also spoken by East Africans (Kenyans and Ugandans) and other expatriates living and working in the town, both native and non-native English speakers. The population of non-native English speakers is significantly larger than the population of native English speakers.

The setting for the individual interviews varied according to the best available option for the particular interview. One individual interview was conducted in an empty primary school classroom after school hours, one in a small meeting room, and one outside under a Neem tree. This third venue underscored the value of using good quality tools while doing research. The digital voice recorder I used produced a clear record of the respondent's voice in spite of the sounds of a generator and clanking metal emanating from a nearby welding workshop. Each of the other two one-on-one interviews was held in the office of the respondent. In both instances, the 100° F outdoor temperature precluded closing the office door. In one case, in spite of the open door, interruptions were minimal. This office was located in a quiet area of a larger compound. The few would-be visitors who appeared in the doorway moved on when they realized the occupant was unavailable. In the second case, the presence of the large clay pot water

cooler drew several co-workers into the room during the interview. Others entered briefly, in search of a colleague or to greet the interviewee. The tea lady came to take the lunch order. In spite of the many short interruptions, the respondent was able to stay focused on the interview.

The settings for the focus group interviews were equally varied. Focus group interview A was held in a university classroom on a day when classes were not in session. Furnishings in the room consisted of several long desks with attached bench seats. Pushing two of these desks together created a table suitable for use during the interview. The moderator and participants were seated around this table. The observers were seated off to the side. Even though the sounds of nearby people, cattle, and birds came in through the large open window, the recorder produced a good quality recording of the discussion.

Focus group interview B was held in a small freestanding semi-enclosed room on the grounds of a hotel. This room was one of many used for outside dining at the hotel. Inside this enclosure, two small tables were pushed together to create a table large enough to accommodate the moderator and the participants. The observers were seated to the side of the room. In order to accommodate the workday schedule of the participants, this interview was held in the late afternoon allowing for approximately one hour of quiet before patrons arrived for the dinner hour and the hotel turned on their music system. At the request of the moderator, the hotel management reduced the volume, but was unwilling to completely turn off the music. However, the music did not distract the interview participants from the discussion and the recorder produced a good

quality recording of the interview. This interview was postponed a day due to the unavailability of all the participants on the originally scheduled date.

An office was the venue for focus group interview C. As this was a shared office, there were several desks in the room. Prior to the start of the interview, the participants, the outside-observer, and I sat on chairs around a small table in the center of the office, sharing a light mid-day meal together. However, each participant moved to sit at a desk when it was time for the interview to begin. As the desks were arranged around the perimeter of the office, and all faced the center of the room, the arrangement still produced a circle conducive to conducting the focus group. For whatever reason, the participants preferred to sit at desks during the interview rather than in the smaller circle of chairs. Perhaps this more professional-looking seating arrangement indicated that they took their participation in the interview seriously. Perhaps to colleagues passing by or looking in this seating arrangement would indicate that the occupants of the office were working. In any case, throughout the interview, the participants were very focused on the interview discussion. The moderator sat alongside one of the desks, within the circle of desks. The observer sat off to the side, out of the circle.

Individual Interviews

The purpose of using individual interviews in this study was twofold. The first reason was to determine whether or not a group discussion format was a viable method of interpersonal communication in the culture of southern Sudan. The second was to explore factors pertinent to focus group design and conduct in this cultural setting. For my research, I conducted five semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. I

conducted the interviews in English. I pre-tested the individual interview questions for cultural appropriateness and understanding by reviewing them with a Sudanese informant who was well educated, had well-developed English language skills, and was very familiar with the setting for this research. Questions for the interviews are included in Appendix A.

Before beginning each interview, I presented a verbal explanation to the interviewee of the purpose of the interview and the process to be followed. I then gave them a letter of consent to read. I asked for questions and offered clarification if needed. Then I asked the individual to sign the letter if he or she agreed to the interview. One of the potential interviewees did not agree to the tape-recording of the interview and did not sign the letter. As I could not interview this person, I conducted five individual interviews instead of the six I had originally proposed to do. I recorded each interview using a digital voice recorder. After the interview, I made a computer sound file of the recording.

One of the interviewees became a participant in a focus group interview. A second interviewee continued in the study serving as an observer for one of the focus groups. This person was chosen to be an observer on the basis of his educational background, his prior work experience, his English language proficiency, his willingness to help with the research, and the insider perspective he would bring to the study. Being Sudanese from the location, this observer filled the role of an insider-observer for the focus group interviews. He was given training on the role and responsibilities of an observer.

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews served to test the validity of the data gathered from the individual interviews pertaining to factors relevant to using focus groups in southern Sudan. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend using multiple groups to collect adequate data. I conducted three focus group interviews. I conducted the groups in English.

A team of three facilitated the focus group interviews, a moderator and two observers. For all three focus groups, the researcher served as moderator. One observer was non-Sudanese. This individual served as observer for all three focus group interviews. This individual was chosen on the basis of availability, willingness to assist with the research, English language proficiency, prior experience living and working cross-culturally, prior experience conducting focus group interviews, and interest in the study. In order to bring an emic, or insider, perspective to the interviews, the researcher sought to find a Sudanese individual to be the second observer for each group. Additional criteria for choosing the second observer included availability, educational background, willingness to assist with the research, and English language proficiency. The researcher was able to identify and train a Sudanese university student to fill the role of insider-observer for focus group interview A. Due to end-of-semester examinations at the university, this individual was only available to assist with this one focus group interview. As noted above, one of the respondents in the individual interviews filled the role of insider-observer for focus group interview B. It was intended that this person participate as insider-observer for focus group interview C as well. However, at the time interview C was held, this individual was unavailable. Time constraints prohibited

identifying and training another person to fill the role of insider observer for focus group C. Therefore, group C had one observer only. For each of the focus group interviews, the observers were present in the room, seated apart from the moderator and participants, and did not participate in the focus group discussion. For one group, the insider observer clarified a few of the questions for participants using Arabic.

Drawing from their experience as researchers in Africa and Latin America, Bertrand, et al. (1992) advise audio-taping focus group sessions and having a reporter take notes during the sessions. The three focus group interviews conducted for this study were recorded on a digital voice recorder. After the interviews, a computer sound file was made of each of the recorded interviews. Additionally, observers took notes during the interviews.

The moderator had an interview guide to follow for leading the focus group discussion. I pre-tested the questions on the interview guide with an informant for ease of understanding and cultural appropriateness. The interview guide is included in Appendix B. Each observer had an observation checklist to fill in during the session. The checklist is found in Appendix C.

The moderator began the focus group interview by explaining the purpose of the interview and describing the interview format. The moderator read aloud to the group the letter of consent, answering questions and offering clarification as needed in order to secure the consent of all participants before proceeding with the interview. Participants were invited to take part in a debriefing session following the focus group interview. The purpose of the debriefing session was also explained to the participants. The purpose of

the debriefing session was to give participants the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience in the focus group interview. This feedback was incorporated into the evaluation of the effectiveness of the focus group interview. At the conclusion of the focus group interview refreshments were served after which the debriefing session was conducted in the same venue. Thus, there was a definite break between the focus group interview and the debriefing session. For each of the three focus group interviews, all participants took part in the debriefing session. Due to technical difficulties this session was not tape-recorded for focus group A. For groups B and C this session was recorded. Observers also took notes during this debriefing session. The set of questions used for the participant debriefing session is in Appendix D.

As soon as possible after the focus group participants departed, the moderator and the observers met to discuss their observations of the process of the focus group just completed. Questions for this debriefing meeting are included in Appendix E. This debriefing was tape-recorded for focus groups A and B. This session was not recorded for group C. However, notes were taken during the session.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process through which researchers make sense out of data (Merriam, 1998). However, Knodel (1993) observes that this step is often the most challenging aspect of a research project. Although challenging, data analysis gives meaning to research as data is transformed into findings (Patton, 2002). Data analysis for this study followed methods appropriate to the qualitative research paradigm.

Individual Interviews

Data analyzed from individual interviews came from the recordings of those interviews. The digital recording of each interview was saved in a laptop computer sound file. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. A master copy of each interview was printed. Listening again to each interview while following along on the printed transcript helped me with analysis. For example, I could hear voice inflection and stress patterns interviewees used for emphasis and note these on the transcripts.

Decisions concerning factors critical to focus group design were derived from the analysis of responses across interviews. Comparing responses across interviews also established the reliability of the data.

Focus Group Interviews

Data analyzed for the focus group interviews was the data generated from the focus group participant debriefing sessions, from the moderator/observer debriefing sessions, and from the notes observers made during the focus group interviews. The digital recordings of the debriefing sessions were saved to a laptop computer sound file. Verbatim transcriptions were made from the recordings of the debriefing sessions. The transcriptions of the debriefing sessions together with the observers' notes formed the data for analysis. Reliability of the data was established through the comparison of transcriptions and observers' notes across groups.

Verification of the Data

Triangulation of data is one strategy used in this study to ensure internal validity. I worked to ensure the internal validity of the data by comparing responses across

interviews for the individual interviews and across groups for the focus group interviews. Additionally, multiple methods of data collection were used: individual interviews and focus group interviews.

Ethics

The following ethical considerations were used in this study: 1) a Human Subjects Research form was submitted to Hamline University, and reviewed and accepted by Hamline faculty; 2) permission was received from the sponsoring agency involved in this project to carry out the research; 3) the purpose of the research was explained to all participants; 4) participation in the research was voluntary; 5) to ensure participant confidentiality, identities of the participants have not been not revealed in the research; 6) participants received no benefits nor was participation detrimental to them; 7) interviews were transcribed verbatim; 8) all research materials were kept secure at all times; and 9) all recorded files will be destroyed two years after completion of this capstone.

I conducted individual interviews in order to discover whether or not there was a place in Sudanese culture for group discussion. I also wanted to know how group discussions were organized and conducted if indeed they were used within the culture. Insights gained from the one-on-one interviews guided me in contextualizing the design and conduct of the focus group interviews used in my research. Feedback from the focus group participants' debriefings and from the moderator and observers' debriefings helped me answer my research questions. In Chapter Four, I present my research data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Chapter Overview

This study was designed to research accommodations needed to focus group methodology for use in southern Sudan. In Chapter Three, I described the research design and procedures I used for data collection. The methods were individual interviews and focus group interviews. The data gathered from the individual interviews informed the design and conduct of the focus group interviews. Themes identified in the data from both types of interview helped me answer my research questions: 1) What constitutes an effective focus group in a southern Sudanese context? 2) What factors contribute to the collection of quality data when using focus groups in this context? 3) Do contributions of focus group participants vary as a result of insider or outsider facilitators? In this chapter, I present the results of my research. Insights gained from studying these results helped me understand how to contextualize focus groups for quality research in EFL program planning in southern Sudan.

Individual Interviews

The purpose of the one-on-one interviews was to explore evidence for group discussions in southern Sudanese culture. I wanted to know whether or not a group discussion format was part of the culture. If southern Sudanese people did indeed engage in discussions as groups, then I wanted to learn what a group discussion looked like and

how it was organized. To accomplish this, I conducted five individual interviews using an interview guide which consisted of ten open-ended questions. (See Appendix A)

My initial interview question, “Do people in this town come together to discuss issues?” provided the answer to my first concern and laid the foundation for the rest of the interview. Because of the collectivistic nature of southern Sudanese culture, I anticipated a positive response to this question. All five interviewees unequivocally affirmed that southern Sudanese do engage in group discussions in the context of community or family. The concept of people gathering together for the purpose of engaging in a discussion appeared to be a natural part of southern Sudanese life. As one respondent noted, “people come together to discuss issues...because Sudanese have that communal way of living.”

Threads of several themes ran through interviewee responses to the remaining questions. These themes, which when taken together help define group discussions in southern Sudanese culture, include cultural protocol, roles and relationships, and transitions. The theme of cultural protocol addressed the processes and procedures involved in holding a community discussion. Roles and relationships focused on the people involved and their responsibilities during a group meeting. The third theme, transitions, concerned the impact of societal changes on community meetings. Following is a discussion of these themes.

Cultural Protocol

Concerning cultural protocol, responses revealed clear cultural expectations of how community discussions should proceed. A convener, or someone appointed by the

convener, assembles the group, opens the forum, sets the agenda, and ensures that all attendees wanting to speak have opportunity to do so, in turn, and with freedom to agree or disagree. The convener also delivers a closing summary of the discussion. An elder is the first to speak after the convener establishes the agenda and also has the last word after the summary statement is given. In a homogeneous group of women, a woman elder would be the first and last to speak.

During the session, all participants have equal opportunity to speak. Participants who have not heard their views acknowledged by the convener in the closing summary may speak again before the session ends. Discussions are held for a purpose and end with a conclusion drawn or a problem resolved. Choice of participants, which is at the discretion of the convener, depends on the topic of discussion.

Saturday was designated as the best day for such a group meeting, either mid-morning from 9:00-11:00 or 9:00-12:00 or late afternoon from 3:00-5:00 or 4:00-6:00 was preferable. One respondent said meetings during the week might be possible if held from 5:00-7:00 p.m. Meetings held from 8:00 p.m. were possible with permission of security authorities. A suitable meeting place would be a public facility such as a school, community hall, or town square.

From calling a meeting to choosing a venue, this set of protocol establishes a logistical framework for conducting community discussions in this culture. For researchers who are outsiders, awareness of these procedures is invaluable in informing design and conduct of focus groups in this context. The second theme, roles and relationships, marks some of the cultural values underlying protocol.

Roles and Relationships

The theme of roles and relationships appeared repeatedly. As shown above, the convener plays a critical role in organizing and conducting community discussions. Chiefs, elders, and community leaders may convene community meetings. However, even if not initiating gatherings themselves, these authority figures have significant influence on those meetings. In addition to speaking first and last in a meeting, it is these authority figures who sanction group gatherings. A convener who is someone other than the chief, elder, or other leader in a community must include these leaders in the planning of a meeting. Doing otherwise would be “overlooking the responsibilities of elders,” in the words of one respondent. Conveners gather participants by channeling their invitations through elders.

Although authority figures in southern Sudanese culture are men, women hold positions of authority as elders among women and can call women together to seek resolution of problems arising within their cultural domain, usually that of home and family. Respondents identified criteria for choosing community leaders. Leaders are chosen “because you find in them wisdom.” A leader is endorsed by the community “because of what he says, because of the way he resolves problems.”

Hierarchy of authority. The hierarchy of authority was part of the theme of roles and relationships. This hierarchy exists in varying sectors of society and plays a part in community discussions. The topic of discussion determines which authority figure at which level of governance gives permission for a meeting. For example, if the topic concerns church affairs, “you go to the pastor or the elder whom the community knows is

in charge of that local church.” One respondent explained that “there is a government hierarchy” at the national, state, county, and city levels. Therefore, if it is a government issue, “you go to the institution, the department related to that topic” at the appropriate level. If the topic concerns a rural community, “the elders who are in that community handle the issues.” In the context of a certain ethnic group in a rural setting, the head of the family calls the family together to address a family concern. If at the end of the discussion the problem is still unresolved, it is brought to the next level, that of the community leader. If there is no resolution at that level, it is brought to the king.

Respect and trust. Data showed that respect and trust are integral to roles and relationships in group discussions in the culture of southern Sudan. Authority figures are highly respected. Conveners who want to succeed with their meeting plans must respectfully defer to authority figures by involving elders and other leaders in their plans and seeking their permission. It is out of respect for age and experience that elders are given the opportunity to speak first and last in an assembly. Also, there is respect for every voice in the discussion. One respondent emphasized that “you respect a person by allowing that person to speak in the discussion.” That meetings in rural areas are held in the home of the village elder or community leader is a matter of showing respect to that individual.

In order to call people together, conveners must be known by those called. One respondent stated that invitees will ask, “Who is calling the meeting?” and will be reluctant to attend, or may refuse to do so, unless the convener is trusted by the community. Another respondent related an experience of attempting to meet with a

group in a nearby town but who was an outsider in relation to that particular group. The respondent had to work through a contact person within the group in order to earn the trust of the group and be allowed to carry out the planned meeting. Two respondents said that a non-Sudanese person wanting to hold a community meeting must have an insider contact. One said, in referring to the insider contact, that this person is “known to the community. He’s a son of that place, and they will listen.” If a non-Sudanese arrived alone to hold a community meeting, without a local contact person, the community would vigorously question the individual in an attempt to establish the person’s credibility before giving permission to proceed.

In situations where conveners make telephone calls or send letters of invitation to prospective participants, prior relationships between convener and participant are necessary. One interviewee stated that telephoning is acceptable “when you know who you are to contact.” Likewise, a convener may send a letter of invitation, but, as the same person observed, “You can’t write someone you don’t know.”

Transition

The third theme that emerged was the concept of transition. This theme impacts both cultural protocol and roles and relationships. The challenge inherent in the theme of transition is to preserve cultural mores and values in the midst of change. Respondents’ use of phrases such as “but currently things are changing,” “nowadays things are changing,” and “in Sudan right now it is like transition” emphasize this theme and challenge. Responses reflected the idea of change in relation to the rural-urban dichotomy, and in gender roles.

Rural-urban. Although I set my questions within the context of an urban center, some respondents based their answers on common practice in rural southern Sudan. For example, concerning day and place of meeting, one said that in the village mid-day was the best time for meeting. Another added that “farming season” was never a good time to hold meetings. One respondent noted that meetings in rural areas are held in the home of the village elder or the community leader.

The female respondent voiced concern that while community discussions worked well in the village, there was not a good forum for similar discussion in town. In the village, people were from one clan, meetings were held in homes, and families could work out their problems peaceably. She stated that, instead of going to the police as they do now, it would be good if neighbors in town “had a body where they could sit together, even if they are from different tribes, it would be very good because they solve their problems nicely in the rural area.” In referring to rural life, she observed that “communities were wiser earlier,” and that “things are messed up now” in town. I felt that the focus of this concern was relationships and on solving family and interpersonal problems. Other respondents, however, described community discussions as functioning effectively in urban settings with county administrators or government department heads rather than village chiefs filling the role of authority figures. These discussions appeared to be focused on addressing community needs such as schools, potable water, and health care rather than on personal concerns.

Gender roles. Observations of respondents underscored the changing boundaries of gender roles in southern Sudanese society. A dramatic change has occurred in who

can participate in community meetings. Previously, “before the 1980’s,” only men took part in community forums, but now “respected women” and “respected youth” can also contribute to the discussions. However, when both men and women participate in a meeting, men still sit on one side of the room and women on the other. They may move together if asked by the convener to do so.

The female respondent stated, “It is always men who call people together to solve problems.” Yet, she also described a meeting of women convened by a woman elder to try to resolve an interpersonal conflict. She pointed out, though, that if the women did not succeed in finding a solution, the problem would be taken to the men. Women, it seems, have a decision-making role within the context of women’s concerns, but not in society as a whole. Male respondents noted that both men and women have equal voice in discussions, and that women do make valuable contributions to those discussions, but none of them mentioned women as decision-makers in society. As this woman stated with a combination of lament and hope, “There is no council of women sitting and deciding...not yet.”

Focus Groups

The reason for using focus groups in this study was to verify the validity of the data collected from the individual interviews concerning criteria for participant selection and other factors relevant to the use of this research tool in southern Sudan. Feedback from focus group debriefings also provided further data on adapting this tool in culturally appropriate ways. I conducted three focus groups. The reader may recall that participants in each focus group took part in a debriefing session immediately following

the focus group interview to give feedback on their experience. (See Appendix D) Then, the moderator and focus group observers held another debriefing session at the conclusion of each of the focus group debriefings. (See Appendix E) These data together with the observation guides complete by the observers led to the identification of four themes. (See Appendix C)

The themes that emerged from the data are participant selection, group participation, language, and trust. Participant selection concerned criteria for forming groups. Participation pertained to how group members interacted. Language as a theme raised concerns about conducting focus groups in the second language of participants. The theme of trust appeared foundational to productive focus group discussions. These themes are discussed here.

Participant Selection

I chose focus group participants based on what I had learned from the individual interview data. I tried to take into account cultural deference to age and authority when forming groups. I sought homogeneity between participants in terms of these two factors. The university students were peers as were the education officers. The group that was least homogeneous was the group of students in the evening English class. In this group, at the beginning of the session, one participant dominated the discussion, especially by being the first to respond to the questions. Group members may have been deferring to the oldest member in allowing him to do this. Or, deference may have been based on socioeconomic status as he was self-employed, owning his own business while the rest of the group members worked for others or were students. Comments from

participants and the insider-observer suggested that the others may have deferred to him because they felt he was more proficient in English than they were, or he may have been trying to impress the moderator. Alternately, it may have been normal behavior for this person to be eager to answer. Others did initiate responses after the moderator intervened to encourage all to participate.

While individual interview data indicated all voices in a discussion were valued, responses from the female interviewee revealed gender inequality in decision-making. In the group that was of mixed gender, the one female participant initiated the response to the first question but was silent for the remainder of the session. Initially, I wondered if this was evidence of gender inequality of voice in a mixed-gender group discussion. However, in the debriefing session, she indicated that the experience had been positive for her and that she had enjoyed participating. She said that hearing the ideas of her peers had been particularly meaningful to her. I thought the fact that she took the lead in the group discussion was significant and made me wonder if she was listening so hard to the group interaction that she forgot to contribute her views. As the moderator I should have noticed this and sought out her participation. The discussion was spirited and it was easy to become absorbed in the interaction.

Group Participation

Another theme was participation in the group. Overall, there was good balance in participation with group members initiating responses and responding to other members. Responses from the debriefing sessions indicated that participants were comfortable in the group. One respondent noted that “everyone felt free to say what they wanted to say .

. . they talked freely.” Participants answered the questions, contributing their views and listening to the views of others. There was agreement and disagreement as participants interacted with each other, but “each of us was respecting the idea of his brother,” according to one respondent. Discussions were lively. Non-verbal behavior showed that group members were engaged in the discussions and included nodding the head, leaning forward, smiling, and laughing. Participants indicated that they had enjoyed themselves during the sessions. Several saw this method as a good way to hear community views on an issue.

Language

In general, participants found the focus group interviews to be a positive experience. However, language, another theme that emerged from the data, was one area in which some participants struggled. I conducted the interviews in English and all participants were non-native English speakers. Using English impacted some individuals and some groups more than others. The four women education officers who made up one focus group were all very proficient in English. There was no mention of language in the data from that group. In the focus group composed of university students, some had strong English language skills. Those who felt less confident using English remarked that they “couldn’t talk as freely in English as in Arabic.” In spite of participants’ perceived lack of skill in English, the discussion in this group was vigorous. The insider-observer for this group said it would be good to conduct a focus group interview on the same topic with Arabic-speakers as “they would also have ideas to share.”

The group made up of students in the evening English class had the most difficulty with the interview in English. The insider-observer used Arabic several times during the session to clarify questions. He was concerned that all participants were not understanding questions in the same way. Responses to the participants' debriefing for this group indicated that difficulties with the language negatively impacted group interaction. One stated, "I am not feeling that all those other people listened to me because I have difficulty for expressing English. I can't feel the other people have heard me." When asked how he might change the methodology for use another time, the insider-observer said that he would try to ensure that participants were at the same level of language proficiency. He felt that using interpreters was not an ideal solution because the interpretation may not be accurate with the result that participants may be hearing different questions. In addition, he noted that if they all understood the questions equally well, "they will respond with confidence." This situation underscores the importance of the choice of language for meaningful data collection in focus groups and also to afford participants a positive experience.

Trust

Trust was important to the theme of roles and relationships found in the individual interview data. This theme also emerged in the focus group data. Data from the individual interviews emphasized the importance for an outsider of working with a contact person who could serve as a bridge for the outsider into the local setting. For each focus group, I worked closely with a local contact person with whom I had established a prior relationship. All participants were invited by a local contact person.

Some of those initially invited to participate in one focus group did not come for the interview. The insider-observer related that they were afraid and each had admitted “I don’t want to come because I don’t know these people.” I found this response somewhat surprising in light of the data. These individuals had been invited by an insider, a peer, and yet they were hesitant to come for the interview because they had no relationship with me. In fact, they had not even met me. This shows the importance for outsiders of spending time if possible in relationship building before conducting research in this setting in addition to working with a local contact. However, I had not met the participants in the other groups either, but they came for the focus groups. Perhaps the difference was how much they trusted the contact person or how well the contact person explained the purpose behind the invitation.

I set the time and chose the venue for each group following the advice of the contact person. Participants found the set times to be convenient. I would have sought out quieter, more private meeting places, but participants did not seem to be distracted by noise or interruptions. While it was challenging for me to intentionally block out the distractions and concentrate on the group, feedback from participants indicated venues were good. It was important for me to trust the advice of the contact person on these logistical issues.

Individual interview data indicated that community meetings needed to have a purpose. Content of the focus group interviews was authentic discourse. The topic of discussion was English language use in this urban center. Participants felt the purpose of the discussion was worthwhile and that their time had been well-spent. This is a part of

trust, also. Had participants felt the purpose was not worthwhile and their time wasted, they may have felt disappointed or deceived, not only by the outsider-researcher, but also by their compatriot who had invited them. It would be important for the researcher to try to ensure this did not happen, not only for the sake of the research, but also for the sake of the relationship between participant and contact person.

Summary

The two research tools I used to gather data for this study provided invaluable information to guide my understanding of how to contextualize focus group methodology for use in southern Sudan. The data from the individual interviews helped me understand how community discussions are organized, gave me insights into some of the reasons underlying that organization, and revealed challenges change is bringing to this cultural institution. Feedback from debriefings following the focus group interviews allowed me to verify the data from the individual interviews on participant selection, group participation, and trust. Focus group feedback also provided data on language choice, another factor important to the effective use of focus groups in this cultural context.

In Chapter Five, I discuss my findings in relation to my research questions. I also address limitations of the study and suggest questions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Introduction

I chose to explore the question of using focus groups for research in cross-cultural contexts because I wanted to use this tool to gather data for a needs assessment project for EFL program planning in southern Sudan. The specific aim of the study reported here was to investigate modifications needed to focus group methodology for use as a data gathering tool in this cultural context. Three questions guided my research: 1) What constitutes an effective focus group in a southern Sudanese context? 2) What factors contribute to the collection of quality data when using focus groups in this context? 3) Do contributions of focus group participants vary as a result of insider or outsider facilitators? Initially, through the use of individual interviews, I established that group discussion is a concept familiar to the culture of South Sudan. I examined the organization of group discussions within the culture to discover factors that might enhance the effectiveness of focus group research in this cultural context. Then I conducted focus group interviews in order to verify data from the individual interviews and gather further data on factors important to focus group design and conduct in southern Sudan. Data from the focus group interviews came from the debriefing sessions held with focus group participants and from moderator/observer debriefings. Additional

data came from the observations guides filled in by the observers during the focus group interviews.

In this chapter, I set forth the findings of my research and present limitations of the study. I also discuss implications of my findings for EFL practitioners and suggest topics for further research.

Findings

My research yielded three significant findings. The first is that, in order to conduct meaningful cross-cultural research in southern Sudan, researchers from outside the culture must have a relationship with a contact person who is a cultural insider. This relationship is important for several reasons, the primary one being trust. Trust was a critical factor in carrying out quality focus group research in this cultural context. Researchers as outsiders need insiders who can vouch for them, reassuring the community and research participants of the trustworthiness of the researcher and the credibility of the research. For this reason, the insider must be respected in the community. Also, a contact person who is an insider is able to help researchers understand the cultural context of the research. Finally, an insider contact can offer researchers invaluable logistical assistance in conducting the research. In this regard, it behooves researchers to ensure that the contact person understands the research. Researchers also must trust the advice of this insider. These two points are especially important in relation to inviting participants and setting times and venues for carrying out the research, and if the contact person is to assist with the research by serving, for example, as moderator or insider-observer for focus group interviews.

My second finding is that southern Sudanese cultural norms impact how focus group interviews are designed. The data revealed factors that contribute to quality research when focus groups are used in this cultural context. These factors are related to trust, as indicated above, and also to respect for age and authority, gender roles, and language choice. Data showed that in their culture, the southern Sudanese defer to age and authority. High levels of homogeneity between participants of individual focus groups in terms of age and authority enhance productive discussions. The data also indicated a possible inequality of voice for female participants in mixed-gender focus groups. A focus group that is homogeneous in gender may yield more meaningful discussion than a mixed-gender group. Choice of language was another factor influencing the quality of data collected. Results of my analysis resonated with the views of Krueger and Casey (2009) that using the primary language of participants when conducting focus groups is preferable to using a second language or relying on interpreters. The issue that most negatively impacted participants' experience in the focus groups was struggling to communicate in a second language.

My third finding was that it is possible for researchers to organize focus group interviews to follow cultural practices for community discussions in southern Sudan while maintaining the scientific rigor of the methodology. When discussing the use of focus group interviews cross-culturally, Krueger and Casey (2009) advise that researchers try to conduct focus groups in a manner as closely resembling natural group discussions as possible. Analysis of my research data revealed several parallels between focus group methodology and protocol for community discussions in southern Sudan.

There are similarities in the structure of discussion sessions, in the role of a moderator, and in participant selection. However, there is a major difference in the goal of the discussion.

Good practice for focus groups is to begin with an introduction which includes a clear statement of purpose. In a similar way, a well-run community discussion begins with an explanation of purpose and the setting of the agenda. The moderator of a focus group interview facilitates the discussion and makes certain all participants have opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Similarly, a community discussion is guided by a moderator who ensures turn-taking and the chance for all present to speak. Moderators conclude focus group interviews with a summary statement verifying participants' views after which participants have opportunity for additional input. A community discussion ends with a summary of discussion points and an opportunity for those present to make corrections and additional comments. In both focus group interviews and community discussions the discussion topic influences participant selection. A significant difference between the two discussion formats is that making decisions is not the goal of a focus group interview while the community discussion is a decision-making forum.

Concerning the impact of insider or outsider facilitators on the contributions of focus group participants, this question was not clearly answered in the data. I served as the moderator for all three focus groups. However, insider-observers were part of the moderating team for two of the groups. Their responses to the data collected did not indicate that the data was unexpected or unusual.

It was surprising to me that only two respondents made reference to what would seem to be a significant recent event in southern Sudan – the end of twenty-one years of civil war with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. One respondent mentioned it briefly when pointing out that community discussions were good not only for addressing problems, but also for planning celebrations. He referred to meetings his community was holding to plan for the upcoming anniversary of the signing of the CPA. The second respondent explained, when commenting on community participation in meetings, that during the war “it was the military who decided on behalf of everybody” so that even though communities have the right to express their views, “people still don’t think they can be taken seriously.” I would have expected the coming of peace after years of war to be a major theme among respondents, but it was mentioned only by these two and only in passing. It may be culturally understood that this is not an acceptable discussion topic in a group setting, and especially not in the presence of an outsider.

In summary, the analysis of my research data indicated that focus group methodology can be used as a research tool in southern Sudan to yield quality data. However, in planning research design, researchers need to give careful consideration to factors critical to quality data collection in this cultural context. By intentionally planning for a high level of group homogeneity in terms of age, authority, and gender, by choosing to conduct focus groups in the primary language of participants, and by seeking to establish trust within the community and working with a local contact, researchers will find focus groups a productive research tool. It is reasonable to conclude that, with

culturally appropriate adaptation, focus group methodology can be used for fruitful research in southern Sudan.

Limitations

Limitations of this study concerned language use, inconsistent marking of the observation guide, the perceived role of the researcher, and the time constraint for the study. The study was conducted in English which was not the primary language of participants. Criteria for participant selection included a high level of English proficiency, but in the actual study levels varied. In general, participants had a good command of English which allowed them to freely interact. However, for some, using English in a group setting seemed to be challenging and impacted participation in discussions.

As I analyzed my data, I realized there were inconsistencies in how observers had marked the focus group observation guide for individual responses. Nonetheless, data collected using this guide gave descriptive evidence of overall group interaction. However, had I created a rubric to accompany the guide, it may have yielded meaningful supplemental quantitative data as well.

Many nonprofit organizations have been involved in humanitarian efforts to help the people of southern Sudan. This study may have been influenced by past experiences of participants in research conducted by such organizations. Also, data collection may have been affected by respondent bias in participants' perceptions of my role as a representative of my sponsoring agency, a nonprofit organization.

Finally, the data for this study was gathered during my six-week stay in southern Sudan. Patton (2002) notes that studies done over a short period of time for these may not be as reliable as fieldwork carried out over a longer length of time. For example, the limited time frame affected the extent to which this study investigated the influence of insider or outsider facilitators on focus group discussions. The original research design called for a change in moderator for each focus group with the researcher, the outsider-observer, and the insider-observer each moderating a group. However, there was not sufficient time to identify and adequately train an insider-observer who would be available to participate in all three focus groups.

Implications

This study has implications for EFL practitioners. Through the use of focus group interviews practitioners can gather data meaningful for program planning and course design. Focus group methodology has the potential to create a positive research experience for participants in a natural, culturally appropriate setting. This is especially true if the research context is a culture with a collectivistic orientation. To create a comfortable research environment, however, practitioners need to be aware of adaptations they might need to make in applying focus group methodology. Practitioners need to learn about cultural protocol for group discussion in their research setting. Investigating that protocol will help practitioners gain insight into cultural values underlying protocol. Understanding how group discussion is organized and the underlying cultural values will help researchers contextualize focus group methodology

in a culturally appropriate manner. Cultural understanding may also enrich classroom instruction as teachers incorporate this knowledge into content-rich lessons.

The strength of focus groups is that this research method yields emic data that provides program planners with insights valuable for developing courses relevant to potential learners. Stewart, et al. (2007) observe that focus groups yield valuable data set in the context of the thoughts, words, and reality of the participants. Additionally, there may be a heightened sense of ownership in a language program by learners who feel they have had input into the program through participation in focus group discussions. This may, in turn, contribute to the success of the program.

The findings in this study underscore the importance for researchers as outsiders of building trust in the community. One way EFL practitioners might do this is by seeking to establish relationships with local educators or by partnering with local colleagues to conduct research for program planning such as a needs assessment, for example.

Another implication of using focus groups for EFL program planning research is that using this method offers practitioners the opportunity to learn about their teaching context while carrying out their research. Fuller, et al. (1993) found this to be true in their study of the effects of household crowding in Thailand. The use of focus groups required that they familiarize themselves with their research site. As they moved through the process of selecting participants, for example, they gained valuable insights into the research context and topic which they may have otherwise missed.

Results of my research showed that focus groups worked well in the context of southern Sudanese culture. Participants found the topic of discussion, English language use in this urban setting, relevant. Discussions were lively and yielded meaningful data. Group members enjoyed participating and felt comfortable with the methodology. This methodology would be a good choice for EFL program planning research in other cultural settings as well, especially when practitioners are willing to do preliminary investigation of cultural norms for group discussion in the context of the program.

Further Research

One suggestion for further research came from a focus group insider-observer and concerned choice of language for conducting focus groups. This individual observed that it would be beneficial to conduct additional focus groups for Arabic-speakers to hear their views on the topic of discussion. This would allow for cross-language analysis of data on the research topic.

Analysis of my research data indicated that gender roles are possibly changing in southern Sudan. Research to follow up the question of a shift in gender roles would be advantageous for future use of focus group methodology in this cultural context.

My findings also revealed that a rural or urban research context may have an impact on focus group methodology. Further research on this topic would be beneficial to the cross-cultural use of this method.

Summary

I began this study with a bias toward focus groups as an effective tool for cross-cultural research. I was pleased to find that the results of my research have reinforced

this view. By engaging in this research, I have gained an increased understanding of focus group methodology and have come to appreciate the flexibility it offers for cross-cultural research. As a result of using this research method in southern Sudan, I have gained valuable cultural insights. As I noted in Chapter One, this study was a small part of a larger needs assessment project for EFL program planning. The research topic for the focus group discussions related to the needs assessment. Those discussions generated data valuable for the planning of the EFL program. With appropriate accommodation, focus group methodology did prove to be an effective research tool in this cultural context.

APPENDIX A

Questions for Individual Interviews

Appendix A: Questions for Individual Interviews

1. Do people in this town come together to discuss issues?

Who attends the discussion?

Is everyone allowed an equal opportunity to speak?

Who usually speaks?

2. How does one find out people's attitudes about an issue in the community?
3. Who in the community should be invited to a discussion about a community need?

Why would it be important to include _____ (parents)?
 (teachers)?
 (government officials)?
 (elders)?

4. Describe what might happen in a group discussion.

Who would speak first?

Would each participant speak on each question?

5. How would you know that the discussion went well?
6. How does one gather a group together?

How are participants invited?

Letter?

Verbal invitation personally delivered?

Verbal invitation delivered by a messenger?

7. What time of day is good for meetings?
8. What are good places to hold meetings?
9. What is the smallest number of participants that would be appropriate to represent the community?
10. How do people know they have been heard?

APPENDIX B

Questions for the Focus Group Interviews

Appendix B: Questions for the Focus Group Interviews

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us how long you have lived in this town.
2. What languages do you hear in this town?
3. What language(s) do you think should be taught in schools?

What language(s) should be used in business?
What language(s) should be used in government?
4. When you think of the English language, what do you think of?
5. Describe a time when you heard English used in this town.
6. In this town, who would benefit from knowing English?
7. If English became widely used in this town, how would this affect your community?

How would this affect your family?
8. Who should be given the responsibility of teaching English and who should be receiving instruction?
9. What languages would facilitate development in this town?
10. How might English proficiency facilitate development in this town?
11. We have been talking about languages in this town. Is there anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX C

Observation Guide for Focus Group Observers

Appendix C: Observation Guide for Focus Group Observers

Participants	Number of responses	Initiates response	Responds to another participant	Answers the question
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				

Comments:

APPENDIX D

Questions for Focus Group Participants Debriefing

Appendix D: Questions for Focus Group Participants Debriefing

The purpose of a focus group interview is to find out how certain people feel or think about something. The purpose of this debriefing time is to give you the opportunity to tell us what you think of this kind of group interview.

1. Do you feel you had an opportunity to share your ideas?
2. Did you listen to the ideas shared by the others in the group?
3. Do you think the other participants listened to your ideas?
4. Who do you think should be invited to participate in a group like this?
5. Is it appropriate to tape record the discussion?

To take notes?

To ask names?

6. What changes would you make?

Moderator?

Participants?

Size of the group?

Venue?

Time of day?

Length of time of the discussion?

7. Would this be a good way for people in a community to tell their leaders about community needs?
8. Is there anything else you would like to say?

APPENDIX E

Questions for Moderator/Observers Debriefing

Appendix E: Questions for Moderator/Observers Debriefing

1. What evidence did you see of discussion?
2. What evidence did you see of multiple perspectives?
3. What evidence did you see that people could state differing opinions?
4. What evidence did you see that people were listening to each other?
5. Did participants answer the questions?
6. What non-verbal behavior did you observe?

Indicating agreement
Indicating disagreement
Indicating discomfort

7. What changes would you make to this group?

If you could do this focus group again, what changes would you make?

8. What happened that was unexpected?

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