

An Analysis of Interaction Patterns in the Focus Group Interview

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Abstract: This paper is based on the analysis of a focus group interview of a moderator and a group of undergraduate students on the topic of self-regulation of learning. The purpose of the investigation was to identify interaction patterns that appeared in the talk of participants and the moderator. In the stream of communication two rudimentary interaction patterns were recognized. The first pattern was named the Catalogue. It consists of a sequence of turns of participants who respond to a request of the moderator and who provide their answers, one by one, without reacting on the content of the previous partner(s) talk. The other interaction pattern was called the Domino. In this pattern participants respond to each other. The Catalogue pattern prevailed in the interview. Alongside with identification of patterns of interaction the study demonstrated the functions of the common ground and its accomplishment in the talk of the moderator and participants.

Key words: focus group interview, interaction, interaction patterns, common ground, grounding.

1 Introduction

Focus group interview is a format of interview that has been used in social research for more than 60 years. It is one of the most popular research methods nowadays. A quick search in the EBSCO database brought 26,302 articles with focus group as a key word in the journal abstracts. Another database, Proquest, brought nearly twice as many items, 56,420 (as of October 28, 2015). This proves the strong position of focus group interview in empirical investigation.

The basic purpose of focus group interview is to gather opinions, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge from a well defined set of participants. The topic of the interview is selected by the researcher. The opinions, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge are elicited in the course of interview rather than “mechanically produced” by focus group participants to the moderator. I deliberately refer to

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focus group members as *participants*, rather than respondents to emphasize the collaborative efforts of individuals within the interview. The moderator presents questions, hints and support for the group in order to elicit answers from the participants. Participants take turns to express opinions, beliefs, attitudes and specific knowledge about the topic discussed. Focus group interview is based on interaction between participants and it differs from research methods that do not allow interactive discussion, such as dyadic interview or Delphi groups (Stewart et al., 2007).

In contrast to the dyadic interview, the aim of focus group is to gather diverse thoughts, opinions and perspectives of focus group participants. Therefore, the chief task of the moderator is to encourage the participants to express the full range of perspectives and aspects within their talk (Vaughn et al., 1996; Morgan, 2001). Consensus is not the ultimate target of the focus group interview. Though participants can gradually reach an identical or similar position, it is not the intention of the focus group interview to harbour in a single perspective or idea. Rather the aim is to elicit a variety of perspectives and opinions on the topic chosen for the interview.

The originator of focus group interview is Robert Merton (Merton et al., 1990). He started to create focus group interview principles and to administer interviews as early as during the World War II. His centre of attention was market research and the aim was to gather data on the customers' thinking and attitudes on marketed products or services. However, in the last 40 years, social scientists, especially sociologist, psychologist and educators accomplished studies with a variety of participants: clients, employers, students, parents and teachers. Nowadays, focus group interview is a common research method in education and its principles and rules are explained in every relevant methodology textbook (cf. Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Flick, 2002).

2 Focus group as interaction

Most of the use of focus group interviews concentrated on the content elicited in the course of interviews with participants. On the other hand, the process in the course of which this content was developing was mostly neglected in empirical studies (Hydén & Bülow, 2003). This is considered a drawback because interaction features contribute substantially to understanding by the researcher of what is presented by focus group participants. Interaction is the process of exchange of participants' turns and ideas. Therefore, the analysis of content and interaction is highly recommended by experts (Halkier, 2010, Gronkjaer et al., 2011). Halkier (2010) stresses that by analysing the interaction the researcher can reveal the dynamics of the group within the social context. According to Kitzinger (2005) the key issue in focus group research is to treat

the interaction in the group (the exchange of ideas and experiences, use of rhetoric or anecdotes, shifts in agreement and disagreement) as an integral part of the data.

Focus group interview requires coordination of participants' actions in order to move the stream of communicated ideas ahead. This coordination is the core of the focus group interview. Each turn responds to a preceding turn, explicitly by adding new information to the content, or implicitly by respecting and using of the right to take the floor in interaction and being aware of the rules of speaking and listening.

Focus group interview has been used predominantly in the qualitative research projects. It has brought rich data of mutual interaction of the moderator and participants – and the participants themselves. In analysing interview, standard qualitative analysis procedures are used, such as thematic analysis, open coding, situation analysis etc. Occasionally, quantitative processing of data is employed, as in Clark and Schaefer's study (1987) who counted the number of presentations of telephone operators in telephone calls, or the number of customers' contributions in the interview.

3 The common ground

One important condition for the interview in focus groups is that the moderator and participant have a common ground. They must share the same knowledge in order to be understood and to accomplish a meaningful conversation (Clark, 2006). They have to possess a joint set of knowledge, attitudes, suppositions and beliefs in order to make interaction move forward. If they do not understand each other – or the situation they are engaged in – the interaction fails within several turns.

Common ground is information that is common to all participants in interaction. It is a sum of all information they possess and which they use while interacting (Clark, 2006, p. 105). This confirms that interaction is a coordination process. People cannot even begin to talk without assuming an amount of shared information, i.e., the common ground - mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions (Clark & Brennan, 1991). The common ground frequently contains knowledge and beliefs that people take for granted, they are tacit, almost unnoticed, e.g., knowledge of the rule that two parallel talks are not permitted, or that the addressee must follow the hints of the speaker to take the floor. The process of contributing to a conversation consists of both specifying some content and grounding it, and the product of both is called *contribution*. Conversations proceeds, in this view, not utterance by utterance, but contribution by contribution (Clark & Schaefer, 1987).

The common ground of the moderator and the participants is always expanded in the course of focus group interviews. Each turn in interaction brings information that the moderator and participants share and further expand – to the joy of the researcher who organized the focus group exactly for gathering new information.

One of the features of common ground is *grounding*. It is an instrument by which speakers and listeners work together to ensure that messages are understood as intended. During the interaction, the moderator and participants attentively follow the stream of talk in order to ensure comprehension. In the case they fail, they address the interaction partner, the moderator or the participant, as the case may be, with a request to remove the incomprehension. This is grounding. They may pose questions or requests for *the repair* (a term of Conversation Analysis; cf. Sacks et al., 1974; Heritage, 1989). On many occasions, incomprehension is revealed by the participant's improper answer, or by a nonverbal sign which signals difficulties in comprehension of the message.

4 The purpose of the study

This study concentrates on interactional characteristics of focus group interview. Specifically, it is centred on identification of *patterns in interaction* between the moderator and participants and participants themselves. By an interaction pattern I mean a section of talk which has similar interactive qualities. Each pattern is characterized by the manner the participants contributed to the evolution of the topic of interview and by specific sequence of inclusion of each participant to the interaction. Alongside with identification of patterns of interaction the aim of the study is to follow how interaction contributes to accepting, respecting and expanding the common ground by the moderator and participants.

4.1 Sample and recruitment

Focus group interviews have always been organized with small-size groups in order to provide opportunities for each participant to enter the talk frequently. Kitzinger (2005) recommends the size between four and eight people. In this research the group consisted of 8 participants, three females and five males. They were undergraduate students who enrolled in the Faculty of Technology programme in a University in the Czech Republic. This focus group interview is one from the set of 18 interviews organized by the Research Centre of Faculty of Humanities of UTB in Zlín, Czech Republic, which concentrated on investigation of self-regulation of learning of university students (Kalenda & Vávrová, 2015; Kalenda & Vávrová, in press).

An important requirement to obtain a synergy of discussion in the group is its homogeneity (Morgan, 2001). Experts recommend homogeneity of the group in order to capitalise on participant's shared experiences (Kitzinger, 2005). In this

study the focus group is homogeneous as concerns the age of participants (21-23 years), length of study at the undergraduate level and the study programme.

The participants were recruited voluntarily. The purpose of the investigation was explained to them and the researchers guaranteed the protection of their privacy.

4.2 Method

The interview took place in the environment which the participants were familiar with - in the conference room within the university building. The camera was installed and the participants received stickers to write their names on for identification purposes. The mediator introduced herself and explained the purpose of focus group and the aims of the research project. The participants were encouraged to enter the talk, while respecting the rights of other participant to do the same.

The moderator was a woman who was acquainted with the rules and practices of the focus group interview and was familiar with the university environment in which the interview was administered. The author is appreciative to R. Polepilova for acting as moderator.

A theme frame was developed prior to the interview and was used to guide the discussion. The topics covered a number of items concerning self-regulation of learning, such as motivation and efforts for learning at the university, the importance of understanding the field of specialisation, qualities of a successful student, description of participants' drawbacks and strength as learners, ideas of how to improve learning competences and the like. The evolution of the content of the participants' talk was not the primary target of this analysis, it were interaction patterns. However, the content was considered when these patterns were identified.

The interview was video-recorded and the recording was transcribed. I used simple transcription rules: the words were transcribed verbatim, including substandard expressions and hesitation phenomena. Longer pauses, laughter and distorted speech were marked in the transcripts.

The unit of analysis was a *segment of interaction*. A segment starts with a question (or similar request) of the moderator introducing a topic, followed by several participants' turns discussing the topic. The segment ends when the moderator poses a next question. Schematically, an interaction segment looks like this:

Moderator's turn + N participants' turns
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A *turn* is a speaker's talk in interaction before another speaker takes the floor. In the analysis I proceeded by identifying each interaction segment, analysing its structure of turns and content. Basically the method of investigation was *microanalysis* of segments in interaction. Segments with the similar composition

of turns are labelled as interaction patterns. The aim was to identify the main interaction patterns in the course of focus group interaction.

In the extracts of interaction, which will be presented below for the purpose of analysis, the following abbreviations are used: Mod = moderator, P = participant (annexed by an assigned numeral). The numeral in the beginning of the turn is the number of the turn.

5 Findings

The focus group interview lasted 45 minutes, and yielded 54 interaction segments, i.e., approximately one segment per minute. This count indicates that the interview was rather vivid, intense and that it proceeded in rapid speed. Overall there were 299 turns of the moderator and participants, or an average of 33 turns per speaker. Participants differed as concerns the number of turns in the interview; some of them had many turns, other had few. As expected, the individual contributions of participants varied in length and wealth of ideas.

In the stream of talk of the moderator and participants two rudimentary interaction patterns were recognized. The first pattern will be named *the Catalogue*. It consists of a sequence of turns of participants who respond to a request of the moderator and who provide their answers, one by one. After the previous participant finished the turn, the next participant takes the floor and adds his/her own contribution, followed by a next participant, etc. This interaction pattern resembles a catalogue or inventory with objects listed in it. Analogically, a catalogue in interaction is a sequence of turns created by several participants who provide their turns.

In the Catalogue each response is relatively independent, however, contributing to the topic of the discussion. Each participant adds to the common ground a contribution, bringing to the topic personal opinions, attitudes and experiences. There is no doubt that the participant implicitly processes (pays attention to and comprehends) the contribution of previous participants – by which they build jointly their common ground. However, what is apparent in the participants' turns is that they are relatively independent. They do not expand the idea presented by previous participant(s). From the perspective of the moderator, the Catalogue is a valuable interaction pattern because it brings an array of opinions and attitudes of participants without intervening or encouraging them in the interaction segment.

The Catalogue pattern in interaction will be exemplified by a segment in which participants responded to the moderator's request to express their views of prerequisites of success in learning.

Extract 1

- 200 **Mod:** What is, in your opinion, the prerequisite of success in learning?
- 201 **P5:** If I enjoy it (*learning*) very much.
- 202 **P4:** Much time devoted to it.
- 203 **P3:** Conditions one needs for it. As everybody can be disturbed by anything so we should make the environment and need not cook something there and do inappropriate things.
- 204 **P8:** Time and courage to talk, communicate with instructors.
- 205 **P3:** If I do not know something I ask.
- 206 **P4:** Chiefly, avoid saying I do not know.
- 207 **P5:** If I do not enjoy it I can spend ten times as much for learning and still I learn less because I disfavour that subject; sometimes I am also discouraged by instructors. I am gazing on it but my brain does not take it. If I enjoy it, I simply read it through and go for A or B (*grades*).

Extract 1 consists of seven turns in which each of the participants presented specific opinions about conditions that may contribute to successful learning at the university. Each opinion was independent of the previous ones. There was no comment or other feature of expanding the previous participant(s) ideas. The interaction pattern of the Catalogue lacks mutual exchange of opinions, but it still contributes to building the common ground of participants and the moderator.

As concerns the content of the segment of interaction in Extract 1, the students revealed that the success in learning rests on their own efforts and management of learning rather than on external conditions. In the language of the self-regulation theory, they favour to execute self-direction strategies. Self-direction is an important component of self-regulation of behaviour and learning, usually accompanied with goal orientation, decision making and impulse control of the learner (Jakešová et al., 2015; Gavora et al., 2015). It is obvious that the participants have personal standards of success which is based on discrepancy reduction between their effort and the product of learning.

The other pattern of interaction that was extracted from the data will be called *the Domino*. It is exemplified in Extract 2.

Extract 2

- 137 **Mod:** How do you conceive it if someone points out at your shortcomings? How do you conceive it?
- 138 **P3:** It's better if I recognize it myself. Then I have to admit I am dumb.

139 **P5**: So have we.

140 **P3**: It is better if someone tells it to you pretty early rather than let you work (*on a task*) with an error. Then it is too late.

141 **P6**: Do I have shortcomings?

142 **All**: *Laughter*

143 **P5**: Thinking.

The Domino is an interaction pattern with participants' turns which frequently respond to each other. To label it, I used an analogy with the game of the domino in which a brick is placed next to the previous one having the same pattern of dots while the other part of the brick has different patterns of dots. The players can move at several directions while respecting the previous partners' set of dots. Similarly, in the Domino pattern of interaction a participant responds to the content of the previous turn. In the extract, the second participant (P5) responded on the previous participant (P3) generalizing the student's negative qualities to all members of the group – they all are dumb. Participant P3 (in line 140), however, explains the preference of error prevention as a better strategy. Participant P6 did not respond to the statements of P3 and P5 by posing an ironic question which developed laughter. Participant (P5, line 143) identified the qualities which the students lack – thinking. The tone of this segment of interaction was cheerful and the mood was humorous, which might have contributed to the responses to each other – the accomplishment of the Domino pattern of interaction.

The Catalogue and the Domino are two contrasting interactional patterns; they differ in the rate of communication *among* the participant. Whereas in the Catalogue there is no such communication, in the Domino there can be a large range of ideas shared among participants. In the interview I found a number of different ways of how participants responded on each other (expressing a range of communication functions: addition, extension, refusal, objection etc.), which confirms the potential of the focus group interview to produce rich data. (The communication functions represent a different research topic of which I dealt in another paper, Vávrová & Gavora, 2014).

The frequency of the Catalogue pattern prevailed over the Domino in the interview. This means that the management of the interview by the moderator and the participants' efforts caused the enumeration of ideas and opinions rather than exchanging ideas among participants. This may be a specific characteristic of this focus group composition and the topic of the interview, so one must be cautious in generalizing this finding to other focus groups.

Many interaction segments included requirements for *clarification* or *refinement* of the previous talk – both on the side of the moderator and the participants. For

instance, if the moderator posed a question and participants did not understand the wording or the context (in other words, they were unable to identify the common ground), one of them (interestingly, not more than one) requested clarification, expansion and the like. This applies also for cases when the moderator did not catch the common core. Then she posed a request for clarification.

Request for explanation is a feature of grounding, i.e., endeavour of establishing comprehension of what is going on in interaction. As it was explained, *grounding* is a procedure of supporting understanding by the moderator and participants in interaction and is an important element of interaction which assures joint activity of participants.

Extract 3 displays two segments of interaction. The first one corresponds to lines 107-108, the second one to lines 109-117.

Extract 3

107 **Mod:** And what helps you in learning?

108 **P2:** Methods?

109 **Mod:** Yes, when you have to learn.

110 **P1:** Chocolate.

111 **P2:** I always print out the list of questions, with spaces between them, onto which I write the basic things concerning the question, and then before the exam I flick through them, and all becomes clear to me.

112 **P3:** I work out the questions for harder exams in order to avoid turning pages constantly to find something. Then it is enough to look into it, and I know I have it somewhere, and I know how it looks like. It is easier to learn in this way. It does not occur constantly, but I have several worked out.

113 **P8:** It is laborious, though.

114 **P2:** I concentrate also on the visuality, so when I pull out a question (*in exam*) I have to imagine where I have it. I do not see the words but the colours help, for instance.

115 **P6:** First, I read it through, then I retell it and, third, I write the question on paper and add to it any idea I came across. Then I compare it with those in my copy book, for instance, what I have in it, then I add on it. In the subjects, we have a lot of derivations, for instance in math.

116 **P1:** So did I, I put everything on paper, I retell it to myself, repeat it, then I copy it and compare.

- 117 **P3:** These are things that you have to take notes about, it is not enough to read it and hope that one can remember it. It must be linked to other topics, though. One must do what one can.

After the moderator asked the question, the participant P2 (line 108) required the specification of the topic - and she got it. Without it interaction would probably have collapsed, or yielded only a few responses. In the second segment eight turns appeared, each contributing to the common ground concerning the methods of learning by participants. The first participant (P1, line 110), a female student, claimed that chocolate helps her in learning, the next participant P2 (also a female student) does not say anything about food or drinks while learning but minutely describes the process of working out the exam questions as her chief learning strategy. The next participant (P3, line 112) contributes to the common ground adding her own experiences. So far each turn was independent; *no one was an extension* of the previous one – a typical characteristic of the Catalogue pattern. This sequence is interrupted by participant P8 (line 113) who produced a remark, a kind of commentary on the two preceding turns, asserting that these strategies are rather strenuous. This commentary is a step aside from the straight Catalogue pattern of interaction because it is not independent, it relates to the previous participants' topics. This commentary was an expression of a personal attitude. Four turns follow (lines 114-117), each bringing the description of participants' individual learning strategies.

One must appreciate the sophisticated details which the participants provided about their learning strategies. However, one can also note that the students coincide university learning with preparing for exams only. There was no hint about systematic and continuous learning in the course of the semester. On the opposite, the students described only cramming for end-of-the-term examination - a typical management of study by many students in the Czech higher learning institutions.

Extract 4 shows the situation in which it is the moderator, not the participant, who requires clarification.

Extract 4

- 239 **Mod:** What do you do if you find that you do not understand something?
240 **P3:** I'll go and ask.
241 **P1:** I'll ask others.
242 **Mod:** Others?
243 **P3:** First students, and if they do not know, then the instructor.

In Extract 4 the moderator received two answers to her question about procedures that the students use when comprehension of the subject matter fails. She wanted the participant P1 (line 241) specify what she meant by "others", so

she posed an explanation request - a typical feature of grounding in interaction. Similar grounding features appeared in other moderator's turns in the case she failed to understand what a participant presented, or when she wanted to make the participant's response more specific.

From the perspective of the self-regulation theory, the answers in the Extract 4 evolved from the self-reliance strategy in learning of participants P3 and P1 (lines 240-241) to reliance on external assistance in learning of P3 (line 143). It is good that participants start with self-reliance procedure and turned to help of others if the self-help appeared inefficient. Self-reliance is a more valuable self-regulation strategy because the learner is autonomous and he relies on self-help rather than on others-help.

6 Conclusion

Focus group interview is a research method which gathers opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of interview participants. Every focus group interview can be analyzed as regards its content and the process of interaction within which the content evolves. In this study I concentrated more on the latter than on the former, however, I had to take content into consideration when analyzing the interaction segments. In this paper I also showed how interaction in focus group interview is organized. By doing this I tried to untangle the strand of turns and voices – which proceeded in a rapid speed – and I make it more visible through microanalysis of interview segments.

There were two rudimental interaction patterns which emerged in the analysis of interaction, which are contrasting, i.e., the Catalogue and the Domino. Each of them has an important position in the interaction. I have demonstrated the merits and shortcoming of both. The Catalogue prevailed in this interview, and I claim that it prevails also in any other focus group interview in which the participants are eager to present themselves.

It was also demonstrated how the common ground was presented and expanded in order to preserve the course of interaction among the participants and the moderator. If comprehension failed, grounding was used and the missing information was provided.

A focus group is not a set of individuals but an assembly of people who were selected because they share some common characteristics. In this focus group university students, who acted as participants, talked not as independent individuals but as members of a social group in their pre-professional phase of the career. Therefore, the findings of this investigation do not have a strong generalisation power. Rather – and in accord with the tradition of qualitative inquiry – they have the potential to explain and demonstrate a certain social and cultural context.

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