

A Case Study of Adult English Conversation Club in Riga, Latvia

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Abstract

Developing the speaking skill is one of the critical aspects of foreign language learning/teaching. Few researchers have addressed the issue of adult English learning in conversation clubs. This paper is a preliminary attempt to describe Adult English Conversation Club (AECC) practice in non-formal educational context. In order to study AECC, we interviewed a teacher and four adult learners and observed speaking sessions at an Adult English Conversation Club in Riga, Latvia. The responses revealed the strong points and disadvantages of AECC, crucial factors in organizing the conversation sessions, the reasons why adults attend a conversation club and how the sessions could be improved. As only one conversation club was researched in our paper, further studies are needed to develop a proper methodology for AECC.

Keywords: non-formal education, adult language learning, English conversation club, teaching speaking,

1. Introduction

Non-formal/Liberal adult education has become a popular trend globally for several decades. Non-formal adult education is not degree-oriented, neither its content is regulated by law; instead educational institutions, organizations and instructors define educational goals and content (Anderzen, 2012). One of the most popular subjects in adult community centers is a foreign language. In a non-formal adult education setting adult learners come with different age, needs, and personality traits. These distinguishing factors can be: motivation to learn, responses to learning opportunities, their intelligence, personality types, cognitive styles, and the need for stimulation; they may have different approaches and reactions (impulsivity and reflectivity) to learning (Lovell, 1984). This extremely diverse environment makes a foreign language teaching challenging experience for teachers as well as adult students.

Developing foreign language speaking is one of the most demanding tasks for teachers. Those who explain second language acquisition based on F1 acquisition highlight that in a natural order listening and speaking skills come first and only after such highly controlled tasks as reading and writing. However, in the past the principals of some foreign language teaching methods often neglected speaking skill; it was assumed that speaking would develop later naturally. The literature on teaching speaking shows great interest toward children and adults in the

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formal education as study subjects. Nevertheless, more and more studies emerge on migrants' literacy and SLA, and adult language acquisition is studied in a non-formal educational setting.

For foreign language learners in order to develop speaking, it is important to have knowledge of socio-cultural context, genre (speech acts/functions, register, discourse), grammar, vocabulary, phonology. It is indispensable to be aware of the characteristics of the target language, integrate that in their existing knowledge and then learn to mobilize these features under real-time conditions (Harmer, 2010; Thornbury, 2005). Nowadays there are a number of techniques to develop speaking. Mostly they are divided into activities for practiced control and meaningful interaction. Both types are prescribed for a particular situation and cannot be argued as more or less useful for a language learner, as each has its purpose and benefits and represent the parts of the same process - developing speaking skills.

The lack of practice is identified as a contributing factor to speaking failure. As a result, there are numerous activities and games that promote the practice. Some of the recommended tasks to develop oral skills are chats, discussions, Interviews, debates, etc. (Thornbury, 2005; Lazaraton, 2001). The chat should occur in an informal environment without preparation and preplanning. It can start with general questions and lead to natural style conversation between a teacher and a learner or learners. It is often difficult for teachers to have unstructured class and may have resentment from parents' side who view language learning as a formal process. However, it is noteworthy to mention that chat-type unstructured classes are known today as conversation or speaking club sessions. Speaking debates date as early as education in ancient Greece, but this kind of session is based on the principles of *Teaching Unplugged* (Thornbury, 2017) that propose the essentials of a foreign language class: conversation driven, materials light (the resources are provided by teachers and students, themselves), the focus is on emergent language: grading of students into different levels is disallowed. Any grammar that is the focus of instruction should emerge from the lesson content, not dictate it (Thornbury, 2017).

On the internet one can find systematic explanation and principles how to start such clubs, how to organize sessions and manage it. Several recommendations are given on the number of members which can be favorable for a session, the venue, frequency of the sessions, the way the feedback should be given, and materials to use. Some principles state to invite people whose language level is similar, provide with a reference library, dictionaries, thesaurus, grammar books, etc., take field trips, bring some snacks, and have a changing mentor every week. However, the opposite view can be detected. English Club members also work well when members have varying English language abilities, meet once a week, develop different skills, provide with lexical input. Most of these recommendations are for foreign language learners who come from formal educational setting, schools/colleges or university.

The absence of research in non-formal context on adult conversation clubs ignited our interest to research this issue. In Adult Education Centers in Finland (Mikeladze, 2014) or as they are known community centers there are some speaking classes which are based on reading but they lack that nature of informal chat which Thornbury

(2005) mentioned in his book. Thus the objective of our study was to research Adult conversation club practice in non-formal educational context. Specifically, our research questions were:

- How are the conversation sessions organized for adults?
- What are the benefits of these sessions?
- Are there any disadvantages?

2. Methodology

For this purpose, a conversation club was randomly chosen in Riga, Latvia which was advertised on the internet. For the method of the research, a qualitative case study was utilized which is defined by Merriam (1988) as contextualized contemporary phenomena within specified boundaries (cited in Hatch, 2002, p.30). The following research tools were exploited: observation of sessions (5 sessions) to describe the context that frames the study and formal interviews with a teacher and 4 adult students. During the observation sessions the level of researcher's involvement was moderate based on Constructivist paradigm (Hatch, 2002, p.76), as other participants (a teacher, students) were involved in co-constructing the findings of the study. Thus, the researcher was moderately involved as participant in her observational work.

3. Results

3.1. Session Observation

The speaking club sessions took place twice a week in a room with 2 tables (groups in circular seating arrangement). The sessions lasted 90 min. The teacher ran this club privately: adult learners did not register, the attendance was available for everyone who paid the membership fee or a lesson fee. Thus, it was cumbersome to say how many adult learners were officially in the group. The members attended classes irregularly and they did not have to cancel or inform the teacher about their absence. They did not prepare any language material or homework and they were unaware of the conversation topics. Mostly the members were both female and male over 30. The oldest member of the club was 71 and the youngest – 26. The maximum number of the participants at the sessions that was observed was 9 and the minimum - 4. According to the researcher's observation on students' abilities to respond to the questions, the level of the participants varied from beginner to upper intermediate.

For each session, the teacher prepared three different sheets with 15-20 questions on a certain topic. In some sessions instead of sheets, the cards were used to play a speaking game. Very few questions on the sheets were Yes/No type, simple questions. Most questions had complex vocabulary and grammar structure of intermediate or upper-intermediate level with 2-3 follow-up questions, which allowed the responder to elaborate on the topic.

Sessions consisted of a prescribed structure: opening, discussion/activities, and closing. It was observed that openings usually lasted about 10-15 minutes. The teacher made an introduction to each topic and divided the participants into two groups if their overall number exceeded five. There were three topics for discussion part. Speakers, in turn, read out loud questions which were answered by a student next to him/her in a circle. After every 25 minutes, the topic and the question sheet changed. The teacher would approach each group and ask them to start a new topic even though adult learners may have been having a lively discussion on the current topic. The teacher would change the group members. It was observed that sometimes students did not want to exchange the seats with someone from the other group. There were members whose English was at upper-intermediate level and they would usually dominate the conversation or try to spark the conversation with the teacher. In order to avoid pronunciation mistakes and unfamiliar words, the students with a lower level of speaking skills chose to read out loud easy questions and expected the same kind of questions to be asked. The speakers who had a good level of English could spend more time answering questions than the lower level speakers. As the activity consisted of turn-taking in asking and answering, each learner's chance to speak depended on how briefly the preceding speaker talked or how skillfully a learner could enter into somebody's talk and monopolize the conversation. Sometimes learners would not listen to one's answer and would not show interest in the response so that the speaker could answer shortly.

The teacher circled each group monitoring, asking additional questions or explaining meanings of unknown words or phrases. He rarely used repairing and correcting strategies to draw the participants' attention to errors. Most of the members made mistakes and errors while speaking and very often the learners' comprehension was low which was evident when learners asked each other in mother tongue for clarification.

The closing was the shortest period; the teacher announced the end of the session and thanked the participants.

3.2. Teacher's interview

For the teacher's interview several questions regarding teaching experience, learners' characteristics and behavior, teaching practice, materials, effectiveness of the sessions, etc. were prepared. The questions were taken from the teachers' questionnaire form that was used in the study of adult language learning in Finland by Mikeladze (2014). The questions were adjusted to the goal of the current study.

The teacher, who was a native-speaker, had been teaching in Riga for ten years since he qualified as a Teacher of English. The teacher admitted that the conversation club responded to the current needs of language learning and there was demand on it.

No technology was used in sessions as it was just speaking practice. However, the teacher was thinking about its integration by showing images with a projector and having discussions about them. At the moment he had very basic - sheets with questions and cards; he preferred to keep materials as simple as possible.

The teacher revealed that the language level of adults who came to the conversation club remained the same ‘... they maintain their English, it does not get any better and it doesn’t get worse. They are just practicing and maintaining it.’ The learners used the same phrases and vocabulary; as a result, one would not expand English very much. In the teacher’s opinion in order to progress in English one needed to do more work and more exercises, watch TV and listen to the radio/native speaking. What adult learners really improved was their ability to answer the questions, because they got used to them.

According to the teacher, a session was not a lesson and as a result, he did not set a goal. The session was just an opportunity for people to practice speaking and a lot of people liked it because of flexibility; unlike the private lesson where one was obliged to come, in the conversation club, a member did not have to come or cancel it. The teacher summarized the advantages: high degree of flexibility, no homework, and the absence of formal instruction/ grammar instruction were advantages and attractive aspects for adult learners.

For the topics of the sessions, the teacher used to ask adult learners in the past regarding their interests/choices. But now he got 85 topics and they covered almost all topics. The topics related to politics and religions were excluded from the discussions. The questions on the sheets were not personal and the teacher did not want people to get into very intimate details about themselves unless they wanted. He encouraged people to ask questions off the page. Learners even asked him personal questions. The teacher sometimes modified questions and renamed and merged some topics and printed out the sheets. Some people had been coming for two years, it was a little bit unfair if they had the same questions and he needed to keep them fresh and he was looking for a new card game, which was a nice diversion from sheets. Some people were kinesthetic learners, they liked touching cards, and he gave the speaking games with cards on every third session because he had only 10 different card games.

People who liked sessions kept coming back and people who did not like just dropped off. The teacher disclosed one of the criticisms of students, who had a high level of English; they did not feel they were learning anything from other people who had lower language level. They did not think they were getting much from the conversation club. The teacher believed that ‘it is not what other people say to you, but it is what sentences you put together and how you form sentences, explain something and for this you need practice and if you do not practice eventually it will become difficult to do.’

The teacher was aware of the fact that in the sessions, adults usually made mistakes but he concluded that they were not looking for a lesson, and obviously, they were not looking for constant correcting. When other people noticed somebody’s mistake, then he stepped in and just corrected them. The teacher did a little bit of grammar attack sometimes. He put some posters with common mistakes on the wall because people made the same mistakes every session.

The teacher liked the conversation club, and believed that there would always be a demand for a conversation club with a native-speaker teacher. Adult learners just wanted all those things that it offered - flexibility and no homework, no grammar to learn, just speaking and they already felt they knew English.

3.3. Adult learners' interviews

Four adult learners expressed their consent to participate in the study, three female and one male. Their age mean is 49. They all found about the conversation club by the internet. For all of them, this was the first time they joined a conversation club. They mentioned the following reasons for attending sessions: a) to develop English, b) to improve speaking, c) to meet other people and make friends. All of them spoke English before they started attending the sessions. The speaking club met adult learners' needs. All of the participants were interested to develop speaking skills and vocabulary. The environment in the group was favorable for learners and all of them enjoyed friendship in the group. The following advantages of the course were named: supervision of the native speaker teacher, question sheets/materials, informal situation.

For the disadvantage the participants mentioned that not all topics were always interesting, the teacher did not speak participants' mother tongue which was a drawback in some situations when he had to explain something. Some members could dominate discussions and speak non-stop. Sometimes members would not listen to the answer, and even were impatiently waiting for their turns to speak; sometimes students struggled with thematic vocabulary.

One of the participants proposed a way to improve speaking sessions by adding more sessions with free chat, without focusing on a particular topic. Two other respondents thought that it would be better if they were given topics beforehand or the topics would have been known to them in advance and set the time-limit for the members' turn to speak. Also, an improvement could be dividing students into groups based on the similar language level. Another positive change could be activating students' vocabulary at the beginning of each session and involving students/adult learners to choose a conversation topic. All of them unanimously agreed that teacher should give more correction.

All participants responded that they would recommend this club to their friends. All of them liked club practice. Even though they all liked the sessions, none of them were able to attend at least 70% of the scheduled sessions. They all pointed to 50% or even less due to their work and family duties. The respondents enjoyed the majority of the sessions.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to describe the adult conversation club practice to develop speaking skills. Particular attention is paid to approaches exploited in the sessions, advantages and disadvantages of such speaking practice.

It is evident that the principles which the conversation club practice is based on resembles affective-humanistic approach: a) respect is emphasized for the individual and for his and her feelings, 2) class atmosphere is viewed as more important than materials or methods, 3) learning a foreign language is viewed as self-realization experience, 4) the teacher is a counselor, even facilitator, 5) error correction is seen as unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive; the important thing is that the learners can understand and make themselves understood (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Speaking club practice is an attempt to create natural acquisition setting where learners are rarely corrected (Brown, 2000). They learn to overcome anxiety and shyness while speaking; they even learn from each other. All these principles create a positive ground for learning a target language.

Even though the following beneficial factors were identified, it is important to scrutinize the setting carefully. To what extent does the AECC convey the natural setting? Adult learners gather in a classroom, sit around the tables, they are divided into groups by teacher's directions. In a real-life situation, adults follow instructions at work or in some specially regulated environment. Adult learners accept this kind of classroom discipline and consider them as necessary elements of learning. The teachers may attempt to reduce the formal classroom instruction, but the setting will still possess the formal classroom atmosphere.

Another aspect that distances AECC practice from natural setting is activities, in this case, question sheets. The ready questions and responding to them are far from natural setting. One question from the sheet could be enough to start a discussion. In a natural setting, a wide variety of vocabulary and structures are present in the speech. Some target language is understood by the learner; much of it is simply 'overheard'. In the sessions the vocabulary and structures are limited and the key dimensions of the context do not change: the field, the register and the mode. Adult learners only get better at answering questions; adult learners with such activities have need of real interaction and a learner with higher language levels turn answering a question into a monologue.

Furthermore, to develop or improve English, adult learners need to have comprehensible input and feedback. Confronting an adult language learner of pre-intermediate and intermediate levels with deep questions on certain topics make them realize the gaps in their knowledge. Swain (2000) suggested that output promotes noticing: Learners may notice that they do not know how to express precisely the meaning they wish to convey '*at the very moment of attempting to produce it*' (p. 100). It is through interaction that learners confront the gaps in their knowledge and skills. What lacks here is the element of learning which at least should happen before or after sessions – as Harmer (2010) calls it a preparation stage to decide what to say and how to say. It is important for students to know the topics beforehand as those adults who wish to prepare for the discussion could practice some grammar and vocabulary, check the pronunciation of lexical items, learn some idioms and do self-study that could improve their speaking skills.

Absence of feedback and the lack of error correction can be falsely considered as attractive factors for learners. One of the most important reasons why adult learning fails is the lack of proper amount or quality of feedback (Rogers, 2001). Progress in learning is integrally related to feedback, without which 'adults lose interest'. They especially need positive feedback. According to Rogers (2001), in an improvement cycle, feedback is a key

element which comes after performance stage and leads to improved performance. Thus, an adult educator should always remember about giving feedback as the necessary element for guiding learners to improvement of language skills and enhancement of their motivation.

Interlanguage fossilization could be a negative outcome of such conversation practice. Without learning and proper correction / enrichment adults regularly make the same errors and hear the speech with mistakes. Gradually these errors become a habit and it will be harder later to unlearn and learn the correct forms. If such club sessions are not lessons and they merely offer practice to adult learners, then they may provoke interlanguage fossilization. Complacency may develop after adult language learners begin to communicate effectively enough in the target language, and as a result, motivation to achieve native-like competence diminishes. The following factors besides the ones that are related to adult learners' age and brain process, can lead to fossilization according to Han (2004), who put numerous factors together in her book *"Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition"*: absence of instruction, an absence of corrective feedback, lack of input, false automatization, lack of understanding, natural tendency to focus on content, not on form, avoidance, failure to detect errors, satisfaction, etc. All abovementioned aggravating factors could thrive in club sessions unless the proper balanced approach is utilized.

The most likely solution to disadvantages of the sessions such as uninteresting topics, dominant speakers, and unpreparedness for the talks, which were mentioned by study participants, could be solved by open, regular communication with a teacher. Expression of needs and desires can help adult learners to feel themselves as grown-ups in the classroom, not as children who depend on teacher's decisions and approaches. Both sides, a teacher and an adult learner, should aim at establishing and maintaining rapport with each other.

Adult language learners' main reason to attend such classes is to improve their speaking skill and overcome their fears. It's crucial that a teacher realizes if the sessions really meet the needs of the students. As a solution for such predicament in non-formal education where there are students with different levels of English skills, differentiated adult language learning can be proposed with the provision of diverse material for students with different levels of skills, stimulating their autonomy in choosing the topics, types of activities and ways to perform them (pair work or group work) with some grammar input and optional homework. If a differentiated instruction is applied to children in formal education, even more, it is critical to utilize such approach in a non-formal setting with adults whose age, background, experience, capacities are extremely different.

5. Conclusion

From the research that has been undertaken in non-formal educational context, it is possible to conclude that more attention should be given to: 1) arranging informal conversation sessions to develop speaking, 2) A teacher should plan speaking sessions along with the students' requirements, 3) Adult learners should be encouraged to express their opinions regarding the session materials, resources and activities, 4) A teacher should be flexible to offer different tasks, ways of feedback, diverse approaches.

As only one conversation club was researched in our report, further study of the issue would be of interest to develop proper methodology for AECC.

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