

Self-directed Conversation Clubs

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ALTHOUGH CONVERSATION CLUBS HAVE LONG BEEN INCORPORATED INTO TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHING, LITTLE HAS BEEN REPORTED REGARDING STUDENT SELF-DIRECTED CONVERSATION CLUBS. THIS IS PROBABLY DUE TO THE FACT THAT IT IS NOT AN EASY TASK TO GATHER A GROUP OF LEARNERS TOGETHER AND ENCOURAGE THEM TO PRACTICE THEIR CONVERSATION SKILLS TOGETHER WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF A TEACHER. SOME SELF-ACCESS CENTERS HAVE PRODUCED AN ABUNDANCE OF MATERIAL WITH THE PURPOSE OF GIVING THE LEARNERS PLENTY TO TALK ABOUT, BUT EVEN IF THE MATERIALS ARE USED FOR A WHILE, THE GROUPS HAVE A TENDENCY TO FALL APART. OTHER SELF-ACCESS CENTERS INDEED, OFFER CONVERSATION CLUBS, AND HAVE FOUND IT NECESSARY TO HAVE THE TEACHER PRESENT THROUGHOUT THE PRACTICE SESSIONS. THESE EXPERIENCES WOULD SEEM TO INDICATE THAT NO SINGLE APPROACH IS NECESSARY OR SUFFICIENT TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE CONVERSATION PRACTICE IN A SELF-ACCESS MODE.

Introduction

This article is based on a project that was designed to produce practice for intermediate and advanced students of EFL who could not conveniently attend regularly scheduled conversation classes in our institution (the Language Center of the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur, La Paz, Mexico). These learners had expressed the wish to continue practicing their conversational skills.

It was considered that these self-directed Conversation Clubs could provide a solution to practical problems such as lack of space and staff, provided that sufficient preparatory work and learner training were carried out during the initial stages. In addition, the learners were expected to consider the Conversation Clubs as being as vital as a regular English class and, thus, establish a fixed daily schedule (varying from one to two hours depending on the group's needs). However, it was at all times borne in mind that this approach to learning may not be appropriate for all learners/context.

Self-directed Co-operative Groups

Self-directed learning principles suggest that the teacher is not in direct control of learners' activities; they do not, however, require that learners should not work together to achieve shared aims. Groups can function well together without the presence of the teacher, but for this to be the case, there must be appropriate learner training, as well as a collaborative and committed attitude on the part of the members.

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Training

Learners are unlikely to change their attitudes regarding the desirability of traditional teacher-centered study without orientation and practice. Helping learners become more aware of how communication works in authentic contact outside the classroom will lead to a realization that they do not always need a teacher present to guide them. Sheerin (1989:134) covers a number of essential points concerning real life communication in her 'study guides' specially written with self-access conversation groups in mind.

During training the instructor works closely with each group, giving them the opportunity to experience the applications of the new learning concepts and to express their opinions on the results. The amount of time required to train each group basically depends on the profiles of the learners themselves. Some learners can adapt more rapidly and easily to different learning concepts and strategies than others because, as Dickinson (1987:125) points out, language learners need to feel that their learning has a purpose in order to be successful.

Group Roles

Once a group is formed and orientation has been given, individuals choose specific predefined roles, each associated with distinct functions to be carried out. If learners work together collaboratively as a team and consistently maintain their assigned roles, the whole group will reap the benefits. (Schurr 1995) It is recommended that groups remain small (5 or 6 members per group) to facilitate the development of trust, confidence and a sense of commitment to each other.

Fulfillment of the responsibilities associated with the various roles is essential to the success of the self-directed Conversation Club. The learners, in fact, must take on roles and carry out activities normally associated with the teacher. For example, one individual is responsible for initiating each day's activity while someone else ensures that everyone has a chance to speak; yet another must make sure that the group does not lapse into their mother tongue, still another takes the attendance register, and so on. Any of the recently published information on assessing team roles, such as, *The Zen of Groups: A Handbook for People Meeting with a Purpose* (Hunter et al 1992: 36-38), is recommended for preparing role descriptions and helping learners to select roles and activities which best suit their own personalities.

In our experience, we were pleased to observe that most of our learners took their roles seriously, although occasionally the person responsible for ensuring that everyone spoke English needed a little prodding to apply the appropriate techniques. When no teacher is in the immediate vicinity, it is very common for groups to fall back into speaking their first language, particularly when the topic becomes more interesting than the language practice!

Activities and Records

It is important to design a wide range of activity types for the Self-directed Conversation Clubs with clear and concise instructions. The activities themselves might comprise anything from vocabulary matching to error analysis, from questionnaires to problem-solving or guided viewing and discussion of videos or video extracts.

Our learners were categorical on one point: it was the wide variety of activities available that kept up their motivation to attend the sessions. They particularly enjoyed completing activities which required thinking skills, like analyzing sentences with errors in syntax or meaning and discussing why they were wrong.

When asked what her opinion was about the Conversation Club, one learner (who had attended traditional Conversation Classes on previous occasions) mentioned that she especially liked the fact she and her companions were not just talking about each other all the time, but that they were also learning about new interesting topics.

An important responsibility of the clubs is the careful documentation of their activities. An *activity record* is provided for each learner to fill out on a daily basis. This allows the group and individual members to keep track of the activities themselves, the aims of each activity as well as their personal learning aims, and to carry out their own assessment of each activity (based on a five-point scale). Above all, keeping records is very important to autonomous learners because they not only feel that they are making progress but it is a useful psychological aid. (Dickinson 1987:84) An example is provided below.

Activity	Aim	My Assessment of Each Activity	Date
<i>Vocabulary</i>		See <i>attached rating chart</i>	
1. Food and Drink	Match pictures with words that refer to food and drink. Talk about preferences.		

Since there is no teacher present to provide immediate feedback, it is provided through other sources, principally the reflection and opinion of the learners themselves, individually and as a group, using the above format as a guide. In addition, Dickinson (1987:83) states that feedback provides a major opportunity for learning where self-instructional materials are involved. Therefore, it is also advisable that each activity be attached with some sort of feedback either through questions, answers, suggestions or explanations. Furthermore, if the activity is one that requires a specific answer, feedback lets the learners know whether their answers are correct or not, and why (Dickinson 1987:83/84).

Self-assessment

It is essential to stress the need for learners to assess their own progress. However, this is something that does not come naturally to many students. Apart from the activity records, other activities should be fostered to help learners develop confidence in evaluating their own performance. Two forms of assessment that our learners found useful were the keeping of their individual *learning diaries* and a *rating scale*. The diaries were filled out once a week and the learners were asked to comment on things like: their group, what they had learned, the mistakes they had made, the different activities, any doubts they may have had, and any suggestions for improving the club. The *rating scale* was filled out on a daily basis and was used to encourage learners to award themselves a score for the progress they felt they had made after each activity (based on a five-point scale – 5 representing the most amount of progress and 1 representing the least).

Trouble Shooting Sessions

Dickinson and Carver (in Dickinson 1987:33) recommend holding *trouble shooting* sessions with the presence of an instructor, to allow learners to discuss any problems or doubts they may have. With our learners, the instructor would sit with each different group at least once a week. Our learners said that they found these sessions encouraging, as they did not feel 'abandoned'. It also showed real concern on the part of the instructor.

Possible Problems

With any new approach to learning, problems can arise. In this case, we found that grouping was a delicate matter. If a group is expected to work together in close contact for months at a time (the Conversation Clubs would cover the same length of time that a regular English course requires – depending on the institution) there must be a high degree of compatibility and/or complementarity. Even though the training session allows time for instructors to observe personality similarities and differences and match the groups accordingly, there are occasions where individuals may show animosity later on down the road.

For example, there was one case where two women who got on well in the beginning eventually stopped speaking to each other because of a personality conflict; they both had the tendency to be leaders. It was then concluded that group management skills did not come automatically to the learners; that it was necessary to make the learners aware of these skills either through group reading activities or questionnaires (we recommend a group management questionnaire in Scarcella, R. C. & R. L. Oxford, 1992). Once the learners realize the importance of such skills, interaction and communication are enhanced.

Conclusion

Despite our consistent efforts, since the project started in 1996 with approximately two or three groups running per semester, there have only been two occasions when the clubs did not work out as we would have hoped. However, to date (1998) the majority have been surprisingly successful and have both given learners the opportunity to learn from the activities themselves and from each other, in increasingly cohesive groups.

It is hoped that the suggestions provided in this article will be of use to any educator who intends to incorporate a self-directed approach in the practice of conversational skills with their learners. Of course, a clear understanding of student needs and principles of group dynamics as well as the application of a range of interpersonal skills will contribute to the smooth running of such activities.

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