

A Case Study of a Social Education Class

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This paper is a case study of a social education class for senior citizens. It gives an account of the students and their relationship with their teacher and what motivated the teacher to do the study. It tries to clarify what social education is and the relationship between that and adult learners. The study was conducted using a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The results of the questionnaire and the interviews were analyzed and revealed many more and different outcomes than expected. The results show that the learners mostly approved the content of the class, which was the main concern of the teacher. They show that the learners were mainly interested in keeping themselves occupied rather than in learning the language. The results also underline the necessity of using special social and communication skills to connect with older learners.

この論文は、シニア市民の社会教育クラスに関するケーススタディである。生徒について、生徒と教師の関係について、そしてこのような研究を行ったきっかけについて述べている。社会教育とは何であるか、社会教育と社会人学生との関係はどのようなものであるかを明らかにしようとしている。研究は、アンケートとインタビューによって行われた。結果の分析では、予想外の回答が多く得られた。生徒のほとんどが、授業の内容を好んでいたことが分かった。また言語を学ぶことよりも、自身を忙しくしておくことに興味があったことを示していた。さらに、高齢な生徒とは特別なコミュニケーション、接し方が必要であることも明らかにされた。

Introduction

The present study discusses the achievements and challenges of a social education class. Social education classes present particular challenges for teachers because of the important role the experience and knowledge of adult learners plays (Dewey, 1938). Influenced by their past education and expertise, the adult learners bring a vast experience to the class that needs to be considered while planning lessons for them (Knowles, 1980). Knowles (1980, p.4) also notes that adult learners exhibit a higher degree of “internal motivation”.

This is a case study about the perception of their class by a group of retired professionals that I have been teaching for over a decade at a community center in Saitama, Japan. This was quite a long time to teach a class,

with some old learners leaving and some new learners joining in. My teaching style was mostly the same throughout this period, except for one time, around the third year, when I tried to incorporate some basic grammar exercises into the teaching material, thinking it would be helpful to improve and raise their general English level. It did not meet with much enthusiasm from the learners and after four times of trying hard, I realized that they were not happy to do anything with grammar, even if it was only some easy grammar worksheets to practice grammar in use, not any way teaching grammatical rules explicitly.

I decided to conduct this study in my eighth year teaching these students as I was curious over the way the learners of this particular group might perceive their English class. I wanted to know their perception of the class so that I could make any amendments that might be necessary to improve the class as the teaching style was the same all along. Over this extended period I came to see that they were not really interested in improving their English at all. Thus, my other intention was to throw some light on the underlying reasons for their joining and continuing the class. I tried to find out what they thought of the class and the class activities and thought that this way the answers might lead to understand their motivation. I collected data through a questionnaire to investigate about the group, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to more fully understand the responses that were given.

Social Education

The term social education is a relatively new one and is easy to confuse with education for the society/social uplifting. It encompasses everything within a broad spectrum of adult education. Adult education itself is not a crystal-clear term and creates confusion. As McCullough (1980) puts it, it is difficult to determine if it is a practice or a program, a methodology or an organization, a 'science' or a system, a process or a profession and also if it differs from the other forms of education, e.g., continuing education, vocational education and higher education. He even goes as far as saying that adult education might be "everywhere and yet nowhere in particular". (McCullough 1980 quoted in Jarvis 1987, p. 3).

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Courtney (1989, p. 17-23) gives five basic perspectives on adult education, which overlap in some areas. The perspectives are: 1. the activities of certain institutions and organizations, 2. a special kind of relationship, as Brookfield (1986) explains, between the external conditions and the internal change in adults that is learning, 3. a profession or scientific discipline, 4. it stems from spontaneous social movements with historical significance, such as the women's movement and anti-colonial movements (Lovett 1988), 5. its goals and functions are distinctly different than the other kinds of education. According to Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), three elements exist in adult education: working with adults, learning for adulthood, and adults working to help others (who might not be adults). The definition of adult education by Merriam and Brockett (2007, p. 8) is well-rounded: it is "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults." Adult education is concerned not with preparing people for life, but rather with helping people to live more successfully. Thus if there is to be an overarching function of adult education, it is to assist adults to increase competence, or negotiate transitions. It also supports people in their social roles (worker, parent, retiree etc.), to help them gain greater fulfillment in their personal lives, and to assist them in solving personal and community problems. (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982, p. 9)

In a nutshell, any kind of adult education, non-formal education, out-of-school education, or community-based educational activities fit into the frame of social education. It is also called lifelong education and in the UK and in Ireland, further education. Social education basically differs from formal education in that it does not contain the educational activities of the school curriculum and it does not focus on competitiveness and employability. Although, in some cases adult education is considered as a component of lifelong learning (European Commission, 2006), here both are treated as the same. The notion of lifelong learning that came into prominence in the late 1960s has been emphasized in Japan in recent years. According to the Fundamental Law of Education in Japan, the principle of lifelong learning is that, individual citizens can learn anywhere and anytime throughout their entire lives to have better personalities and to enjoy rich lives (MEXT, Japan, 2011).

Moreover, it is a way of “community development and networking with participation and initiatives of local people” (UNESCO).

Adult Learners

Different societies and cultures might have contrasting understandings of what it is to be an adult. The term ‘adult’ can be set against ‘child’. In between adult and child or overlapping between them, there may be an idea of ‘youth’. At base adults are older than children. Therefore, a set of expectations automatically get attached to it. They are not necessarily mature, but ‘they are supposed to be mature, and it is on this necessary supposition that their adulthood justifiably rests’ (Paterson, 1979, p. 13). Other scholars state that “psychological maturity and social role” define an adult (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 7). As Lindeman (1926, p. 4) puts it: “This new venture is called adult education not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits.”

Andragogy, a well-known theoretical approach to adult learning by Knowles (1984), gives a five-point framework regarding the characteristics of adult learners. One of them assumes that the adults bring vast experience to the learning context that is a resource for learning/education.

Background

The learners in the English class which is the focus of this study join the class as a form of recreation in their retired lives, as social education helps them in improving their lives with a range of useful activities to engage in. The number of people in the class varies usually between 5 and 12 as some people leave and some other people join. Members leave the class either because of fragile health and health-related problems or the death of a spouse. Only one of the class members has attended throughout the ten years I have taught the class. The rest of the members have been switched and at present they are seven in total. Almost all of them are retired professionals and are of the same age group. Initially the title of the class, chosen by the members, was Silver English Conversation. I was asked by a city hall employee to carry on with this class after their former teacher had left Japan twelve years ago. Three years ago, in an effort to attract new and younger members, they decided

to change the title of the class. The members put their heads together and after a long and heated discussion the title was changed to Friendship English Lounge. Unfortunately, it did not fulfil its purpose of attracting young/younger members but it did bring some young visitors to the class and finally two not-so-young members.

The class meets twice a month, the first and third Friday afternoon for an hour and a half. Depending on the members' schedule, the day and the time might change sometime. In class we generally engage in simple conversation on a variety of topics, sometimes chosen by the teacher, sometimes by the students. Usually they start with telling each other about what they did in the past week or weekend. The students never have a shortage of news as they really enjoy doing things. They do things individually or with their families and at the same time they often go out with their classmates. In their outside activities with the classmates, going to the movies, eating out, having tea/coffee are common, next comes going to a garden or a park and going to a concert or a play. Once in a while they might take trips as a group, although everybody might not join every time. They might go to another place in Japan, like, Kyoto or Hokkaido, or a nearby country, like, Taiwan or Singapore. When they have little to report, they talk about recent news or TV programs.

After they finish talking about their activities or the news, which usually takes about 30 minutes to half of the class time, they usually do an activity that I have brought in. It might be a simple worksheet to read and write a little or it might contain a little reading and then discussion. They are all college graduates and their level might be the same as the present college students. Occasionally, someone starts saying something totally different and the other joins in and they might get carried away. They basically keep talking in English, except for a few Japanese words thrown in here and there.

The Study

The Questionnaire

The people who took part in this study were seven retired professional women over the age of sixty- five who were taking the class with me at that time. I used a questionnaire consisting of seven questions. The questions focused on what they thought of the contents of the class activities and how to make the class better for them to

enjoy the experience. They were asked to fill out the questionnaires distributed to them while they were in the class and return it to me upon completion.

The Interviews

The other method used was semi-structured interviews, a qualitative method of inquiry, with pre-determined, open-ended questions, conducted a few times over the course of six months. All of the people in the class were interviewed. I asked for their permission to let me interview them and they co-operated without a question. I conducted the interviews in total three times after the class in a cafeteria. The purpose of the interview was to clarify the answers of the questionnaire and to get more information.

The data I collected consisted of the answers to the questionnaire and the notes that I took in the interviews. I tried to gain consent for recording the interview but they said that they 'did not like their own recorded voices'. This way it was a lengthy process and the data organization, analysis and managing was difficult and time consuming. The data was of a 'nonnumerical kind' expressed in words/non-numbers. This kind of data is very useful in helping "to pin down the facts about people" (De Munck and Sobo, 1998, p. 16).

According to Bernard (1994), 'Hanging out' is the process through which a researcher can gain trust and is able to establish a relationship with the participants over time. Hanging out is also proposed by DeMunck and Sobo (1998) by which people might "get to know you outside your 'professional' role" (p. 41). I hung out with the group at the cafes close to the venue of the class over an extended period of time and did the semi-structured interviews there. I was fully aware that they might not say anything unpleasant to my face, so I tried to make careful questions and hide any strong attachments I had to them. I analyzed the data of their written and verbal responses.

The Findings

First I present the results of the questionnaire, then I discuss the information gleaned from the interviews. I have chosen to present only the answers that were most revealing and most useful to me in understanding how the students viewed this class.

The Questionnaire

The first question asked in what way they studied outside the class, if they did at all. The replies were all positive, and the prominent ones were by watching English language TV programs (mainly news, almost every day) and sometimes movies in English with/without subtitles, by listening to the English language radio programs/music, from Japan and/or abroad, by reading easy books/graded readers written/translated in English, singing English songs, and talking with foreigners.

In answer to the sixth question, which asked if they liked anything particular about the class, they said that they liked the opportunity to use their English and the environment that was made of wonderful classmates and the cheerful and energetic young teacher. I was very flattered by this last comment. Some liked discussions on music, art, movies and culture in different countries and Japan. Most of them were not sure about acquiring English or developing their English competency but they were happy keeping in touch with English through the class. Some said they came to know a lot about other countries and cultures and even about Japan through some activities and discussions in the class.

The last question asked what should be changed to improve the lessons. Some were neutral or had no opinion. Overall, most of them felt nothing needed to be changed and a few felt that one area might be changed, but the results differed as to which area should be changed.

The Interviews

One of my queries, apart from the questionnaire, was why they were taking English lessons. The answer varied but the main points were, for communicating with foreigners in Japan, for talking with local people while traveling abroad and especially for ‘bokeboushi’ (guarding against senility).

I mainly tried to emphasize the same questions as in the questionnaire to clarify the answers I received. I got mostly the same replies. The added information I got was that they were happy to attend the class because they could make long-term friends through the class. Several people said that they did some talking in English with their Japanese classmates before and/or after the class as well as during the class which could not have been possible if they were not classmates on friendly terms. They said that it helped them to keep up their English because except for that they had very little chance of speaking in English in Japan.

About changes to improve the lessons, one asked for clarifications on grammar and another wanted to have their pronunciation ‘corrected’. What most of them did not like was doing the tongue-twisters as their ‘tongues did not move’. The reason two of them gave was while practicing them they were awfully worried that their false teeth might fall out.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the learners’ opinions about the class. The results show the learners were motivated and practiced English outside the class (once a month or more) and were supportive of the content of the class. Most felt there was no need to change the materials used or the way of using them. They thought the skills they were developing were speaking and some listening. Most of them thought getting the chance of ‘keeping in touch’ with English was very useful for them. They did not dislike much of the practices of the class except for doing tongue-twisters for some special reason. All of them liked the environment of the class that supported their language practices (see Table 1).

The findings of the interviews reinforced the results of the questionnaire survey. I tried to identify and interpret the common and recurrent themes and analyze prominent patterns in the themes. The reasons why they were

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studying English became clear. Many of them described it as useful for communicating with foreigners, in Japan and abroad. Moreover, all strongly felt it was an effective way of giving some exercise to the brain to keep it active, so it was helpful to their actual life.

Table 1.

Response Analysis

General	Learners practice English outside the class Learners like the materials used in the class Learners like the environment of the class Learners develop speaking & listening skills through the class
Specific	Learners think that English is useful for communication with foreigners in and out of Japan Learners think that learning English is specifically important for them for keeping their brains active

This study tried to find out the perception of the learners of their class regarding its activities and materials, which directly connects to the teacher. It is difficult to feel confident to be the teacher of a group where everyone has a good level of education along with immense life experience. I discovered some things that I was not expecting and I feel that I have obtained a greater insight into these learners' motivations for attending the class as well as some insight into how I as a teacher need to adapt to their learning styles.

Bohonos (2013) says that understanding the life experiences of adult learners is particularly important. I learned many things from the group, especially, regarding social skills and communication strategies to be used while dealing with older people. For example, when I suggested that we talk about our weekends, they reminded me politely that, they did not have any weekends anymore. As retired people they could not differentiate between their weekdays and weekends. On another occasion, when they were talking about having special discounts for the movies, I bluntly commented on that as a great opportunity. They grimly told me that they would rather have their youth than having discounted movie tickets. Having discounted tickets was not a happy thing for them as that comes with aging. Again I was reminded to be careful when talking with the elderly.

From this study it is hard to tell if the class and the materials used have any major impact on the learners' English communication skills, but it might have become clear that more than their linguistic performance this

group of learners put emphasis on spending quality time in a nice environment and in good company, and that they are more concerned about keeping their minds lively and are eager to remain active members of the community. I hope that the story of my journey to this greater appreciation of the needs of a social education class might be of some potential interest to other teachers.

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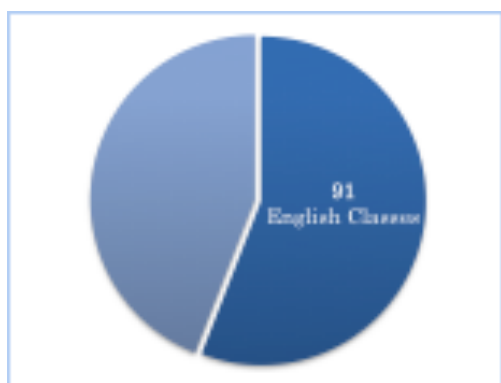
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Appendix

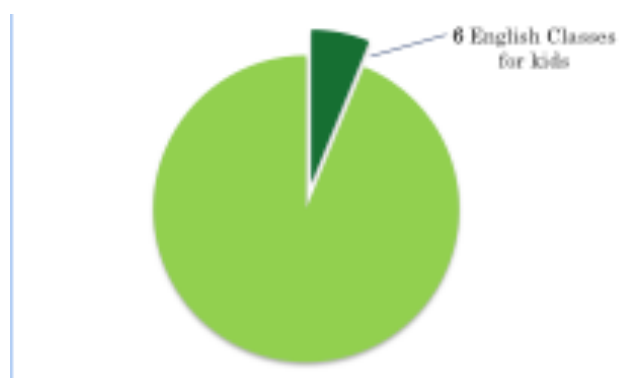
Questionnaire

1. Do you study English outside the class? If yes, what and how do you do?
2. Does this class help you to acquire English or any kind of knowledge?
3. Do you think the class materials are appropriate for you?
4. Does this class help you to develop the skills you want to develop?
5. Was there anything ever that made you feel uneasy during the class?
6. Is there anything you particularly like about the class? If yes, what is it?
7. Is there anything you think needs to be changed to improve this lesson?

Questionnaire Response Analysis



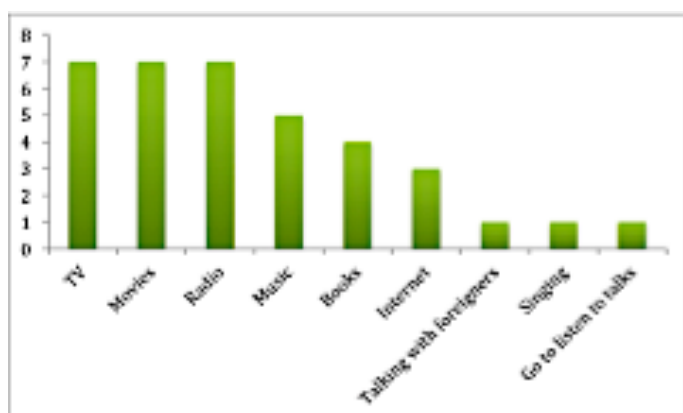
English classes among the 158 Language Classes held at Saitama City Kominkan



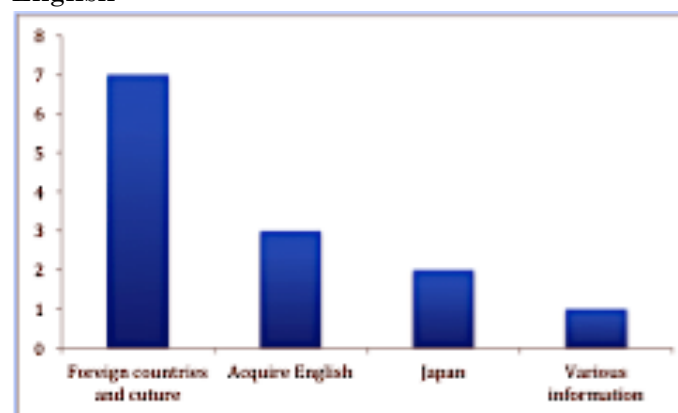
English Classes for kids among the 91 English Classes mentioned above

Courtesy: shogaigakushu center, Saitama City, Saitama

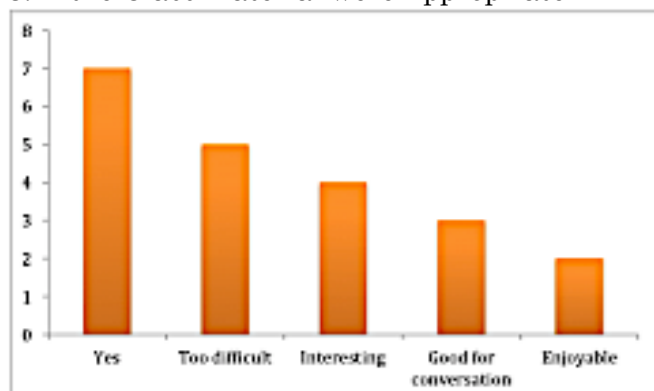
1. Ways English is Studied Outside the Class



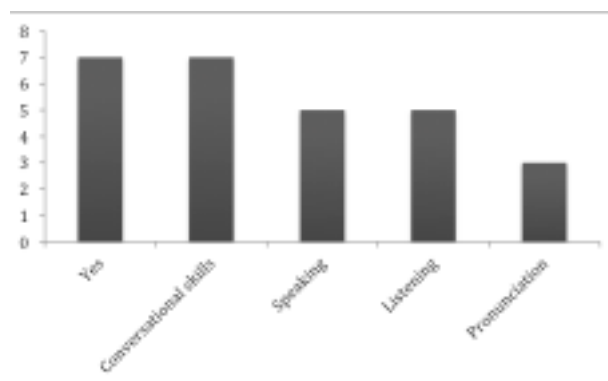
2. If and How the Class Helped in Learning English



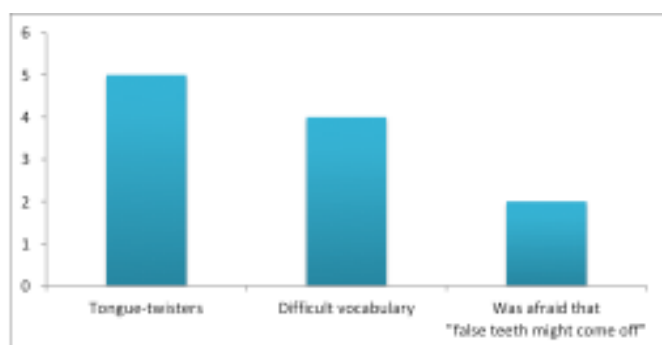
3. If the Class Material were Appropriate



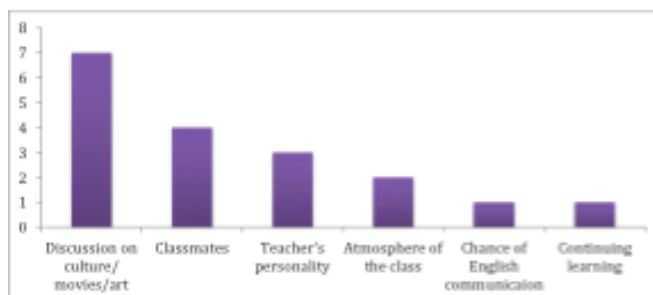
4. If the Class Helped in Developing any Skills



5. If the Class caused any Uncomfortable Moments



6. If and What they Liked about the Class



7. If and What to Change to Make the Lesson Better

