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Building Language Skills and Social Networks in an Advanced Conversation Club: English Practice in Lecce

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Abstract

Opportunities for intermediate and advanced self-access language learners to increase English proficiency are fewer in some Italian regions than others. In Lecce, Puglia, a province in the country's farthest southern reaches, the informal conversation club "English Practice in Lecce" (EPiL) offers one solution. Established nearly a decade ago, EPiL is a lively social learning space that continues to attract Italians, non-Italian non-native English speakers, and first language English speakers to its weekly gatherings. Membership includes a cross-generational mix of long-term stalwarts and new participants. This article presents preliminary findings from a study of EPiL meetings conducted across four field seasons. It discusses EPiL's roots, describes typical meetings and practices, and draws from interviews and questionnaire results to suggest reasons for its success. The article proposes that EPiL serves two functions especially well, and that both contribute to its longevity. First, EPiL is a mechanism for high level self-access learners to better their English through discussions of self-chosen wide-ranging topics that sustain their interest. Second, EPiL fosters conditions for multicultural community building to take place while expanding participants' social networks across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Conversation club, intermediate-level learners, multicultural social networks, Italy

Native English speakers and proficient second language English speakers are commonplace in some Italian cities. In regions with large expatriate populations, English-language newspapers and magazines are published locally in print form and on-line, and some embassies, consulates and cultural centers sponsor public events in English. In other regions, including parts of the South, fewer opportunities exist for self-access language learners to boost competence. In that regard, the informal association English Practice in Lecce (EPiL) is a mainstay for intermediate and advanced self-access English learners in one geographically remote city. Nine years after its founding, EPiL continues to attract new members and retain longstanding ones. This article presents some results of a qualitative study of EPiL conducted by the author during four field seasons (2016–2019). It discusses EPiL's history, describes typical

meetings and practices, and suggests explanations for EPiL's continued success that may be useful to persons considering similar initiatives.

Lecce, population 97,000, is the capital city of a homonymous geographical province at the southernmost tip of the Region of Puglia. It is also the unofficial capital of a linguistically and culturally distinct zone called the Salento that is associated with characteristic folk music and dances, wine production, and stupendous natural beauty. Referred to as the Florence of the South or Capital of the Baroque for its art and architecture, tourism to Lecce is steadily increasing. The city and province are also becoming relocation destinations for expatriates from Britain, Australia, the United States, and Northern Europe. Growth in tourism and migration notwithstanding, English is not as widely spoken in Lecce as in other destination cities such as Rome, Florence, and Venice. This situation poses challenges for motivated self-access learners who want to improve their skills through interactions with native English speakers and highly competent second language English speakers. Conversation clubs such as EPiL assist them in reaching that goal.

The participant-members of EPiL meet Tuesday evenings at nine o'clock p.m. in the back room of a casual restaurant/bar called Southward (*Verso Sud*). The venue is owned by a genial northern Italian transplant who offers use of the room at no charge, although organizers remind participants that they are asked to spend at least 4 *euro* on drinks and snacks. Five to 20 participants typically converge there any given week; non-summer months see greater numbers as they do not conflict with high season travel. There is no formal meeting agenda; attendees leap directly into conversation about topics ranging from elections to recycling to their personal musical preferences. From time to time a club organizer will introduce and discuss a relevant word or phrase that is likely unfamiliar to many non-native English speakers. Participants frequently move around the table to introduce themselves to new attendees or converse with ones whom they already know. When they depart two to three hours later, most add "See you next week" to their goodbyes.

In an essay concerning an English language conversation club in Mexico, Sigala Villa et al. (2019) note that "leading a successful conversation club requires certain strategies, skills, and abilities that leaders must perform. In many cases, these skills are not learned from theory, but more so from daily practice and some intuition" (p. 165). That insight also applies in Lecce, where various conversation clubs have taken shape, sometimes concurrently. The lifespans of

English language groups generally range from a season to a few years. Some meet at local restaurants or bars, others at private homes. One group founded by Italians based its practice on a series of language learning textbooks by a popular British author who had relocated to Sicily. That club, which met for six years, was open to learners of all ability levels; from time to time native English speakers also took part. EPiL, the focus of the present article, is Lecce's longest-lived English conversation group for self-access learners. In the more than nine years since its establishment, it has remained an active community of practice, growing in both size and reputation. To date it has amassed approximately 90 participant-members ranging in age from under 25 to over 60. Some attend for months, others for years. A few have attended from the beginning. 78 people currently follow its social media page.

EPiL's founder was an American expatriate who relocated to Lecce and pursued a second career as an English instructor. He was joined the second week by the group's co-organizer, a University of Salento graduate with an exceptional command of English who manages the club's social media. The latter serves, as well, as a cultural mediator, assisting second language learners and native English speakers better to communicate culturally specific ideas or attitudes in instances where there is no simple equivalence. The two association leaders share responsibility for convening EPiL meetings; at least one and usually both were present every week throughout the data collection periods.

EPiL was launched in the wake of another conversation club's demise. That group lost popularity when the organizer, a different expatriate native English speaker, moved meetings to a private home and began serving food at a nominal charge. New rules (such as a request for reservations and paying the organizer for preparing food) adversely affected participation. Another factor was that participants' differing levels of language proficiency led advanced English learners to lose interest.

To forestall a similar situation developing in EPiL, its co-organizers decided always to hold meetings at easily accessible public venues and to be clear that the group was intended for intermediate and advanced English speakers. Thus, unlike some conversation lounges or similar types of spaces elsewhere that lack an English-only policy (Thornton, 2018), EPiL organizers insisted on maintaining both an English-only plus a competency requirement. In the beginning, the American organizer interviewed potential participants to evaluate their level of English, a practice that occasionally led to hurt feelings. The organizers did understand, however, that first-

time visitors often underperformed because they were nervous. Entrance interviews quickly ceased when organizers concluded that participants' continued engagement was directly related to their ability to keep up in conversations with high-level learners. Those who could not maintain that level of conversation simply stopped attending. In reviewing EPiL's history with me, the expatriate founder, who possessed high proficiency in Italian, suggested that limiting participation had actually also increased his own commitment. He explained that he had missed occasionally participating in intellectually provocative conversations in English. EPiL participant-members, already possessing an intermediate level command or better, had plenty to say and the ability to say it in English. Of course, more than one conversation takes place at a time during EPiL meetings, which helps to accommodate subtle differences in skill between intermediate and advanced speakers.

I happened upon EPiL in Spring 2016, shortly after I arrived in Lecce to launch a long-term anthropological study of multicultural social networks. One day a non-Italian English second language speaker from Scandinavia, who had recently opened a business in Lecce's historic center, asked me if I was "going to the group" that evening. Thus, like most members, I learned about EPiL by word of mouth. In concert with the views of Mynard and others who have conducted closely related research elsewhere (Mynard et al., 2020), I find that the investigation of activities which take place in micro-spaces and of relationships formed there enhance understandings both of the dynamics of communities of practice, and of communities in general. I began conducting participant-observation research as a participant-member of EPiL shortly after I became aware of its existence. In 2019—with the organizers' permission and the approval of my university's Human Subjects Review Board—I distributed a questionnaire (in English and in Italian) that explored participants' experiences with the group. The questionnaire was anonymous; the only demographic data collected were sex, native language, and respondent's reported position in one of four broad age bands (under 25; 26-40; 41-60; 60+). Of the 50 questionnaires distributed, 25 were returned. The number of expatriate and Italian respondents was nearly even.

In addition to questions about the mechanics of group meetings and what participants particularly enjoyed about the club, some questionnaire sections spoke directly to my research interests in whether multicultural social relationships established in this setting carried forward to other contexts. In other words, did participation in this informal social organization promote

multicultural network building and how? To frame my study, I drew from the work of sociologist Robert Putnam. Putnam (2000) suggests that the production of social capital is one outcome of successful informal social associations. Social capital, he writes, “refers to connections among individuals [and the] social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Putnam argues that social connectedness within informal social organizations creates conditions for friendships to take root. Friendships among the members of voluntary groups yield social capital that can be mobilized elsewhere in everyday life. I deployed interviews and the questionnaire, in part, to try to understand whether participation in EPiL contributed to the formation of friendships that spanned cultures and languages. Of the 23 questions included on the questionnaire, six have particular relevance to the present discussion. Those questions concerned the length of time that individuals had engaged with the group, their motivations for joining, whether they had established friendships there, whether they socialized with members in other contexts, whether EPiL was important to their personal happiness, and if they had suggestions for the organizers.

From respondents’ answers to the question “How long have you participated in this group?” I learned that two people had participated since the beginning, five for over five years, six for three to five years, six for one to three years and six for less than one year. Thus, out of 25 respondents, half had attended for fewer than three years but six of those individuals had already participated for more than one year. That finding suggests that EPiL will continue. The question “What are 3 reasons why you participate in this group?” yielded markedly consistent answers. Some (not all) non-Italian non-native English speakers (primarily Europeans) cited keeping up their English. Every non-Italian respondent, however, highlighted making new friends, engaging in social networking, developing cultural understanding, or feeling like part of a local community through participation in EPiL. Along similar lines, every native Italian speaker mentioned improving their English, however many also reported wanting to meet people from other cultural backgrounds or to know different kinds of people. One respondent wrote on his questionnaire that through participation in EPiL “we improve one another across nationalities.” His enthusiastic remark was in concert with the perspective taken by the group’s Italian co-organizer, who explained:

[My motivation] for becoming involved in the group [is that it provides] a great chance to meet people who are more open-minded towards different cultures, and genuinely

interested in a cultural exchange. [These attributes seemed] hard to find ... given the general trend of bars and pubs playing deafening music, targeting people who, in my opinion, are not too keen on the listening part of social interaction [in these types of clubs].

Regarding the unanticipated outcomes of social exchanges that take place at EPiL meetings, in fact, it is relevant to consider responses to the question “Have you made foreign friends as a result of participation in this group?”. 18 respondents reported yes, two indicated they were unsure, four stated no, and one left it blank. While most members indicated that they had made foreign friends at EPiL, their answers to the question “Have you socialized informally with people in this group outside regular meetings?” were even more telling. They revealed that every respondent had participated in at least one outside social activity with another member. Many had socialized with a dozen or more. The fact that participant-members seek one another’s company outside regular meetings is unsurprising when one considers responses to the query, “Is this group important to your personal happiness?” 21 respondents replied positively, two said they did not know, one said no, and one gave no response. Their answers certainly suggested that friendships were developing, social capital was being created, and multicultural networks were expanding due to participation in EPiL. One-to-one interviews with members provided additional evidence. An Italian interviewee told me, “my week isn’t good if I don’t come here and talk to my good friends.” Another stated, “I feel more at home and have more in common with the people in this room wherever they are from than many people I have known my whole life.” A non-Italian commented, “As a foreigner it is sometimes difficult to recognize one’s value. In this group the little that I offer is appreciated by Italian speakers and I feel comfortable.”

Regarding the study of how communities take shape, Yvonne Ryder, a scholar in urban studies, has noted that in some types of communities heterogenous actors become connected through mutuality and reciprocity even in situations where prevailing social norms are less strict (note: I would also add “cultural” norms). She writes “putting people in contact with one another is a first step towards...collaboration” (Ryder, 2009, p. 28) and reminds us that “different members of a community...bring different things to network relationships” (p. 33). This article has shown that the participant-members of EPiL are linguistically, culturally, generationally and nationally heterogenous. In concert with Ryder’s point, I suggest that among the key reasons

EPiL remains robust is that it creates conditions for multicultural collaborations and social networks to flourish, albeit in an unplanned and unscripted way. That is, while the organizers' original intent was straightforward—hold stimulating discussions in high-level English and help self-access learners improve their conversational skills—in fact the association has also achieved other fortuitous objectives.

Near the end of her time as a book club organizer for English language students in Japan, Holly Marland, an English second language teacher on assignment in that country, reflected on what would happen after she left the group:

Will the Internet help to keep us in touch? Will any of the members start book clubs of their own at some point in the future? I don't know, but what I can confirm is this: we had a lot of fun socializing together. (Marland, 2011, p. 38)

Marland's musings on her experiences at the intersection of language learning and sociability call to mind a contemplative remark made to me by EPiL's expatriate founder:

The goal [of EPiL] is not to be a social group, but if people come and they make friends, great. The bottom line is that everyone's life should get better The way that people interact in the south [of Italy] is on a social basis. ... I feel privileged to know these people. So, if social relationships happen that's great. The good spreads.

What precisely is the “good” in EPiL that has enabled it to remain vital nearly a decade on? Survey responses hold clues here as well. Participants were asked whether they had suggestions for the organizers. Surprisingly few respondents wrote anything other than “thank you, organizers,” “never stop,” and “don't change a thing.” Three praised the venue, Southward, and its owner for contributing to a positive experience. Two noted that they would enjoy playing more word games. One stated that he appreciated the opportunity to “engage in a casual gathering that requires no planning and no obligation to attend each week.” Readers who are interested in launching initiatives similar to EPiL may also want to keep in mind that the club is managed by expatriate and host culture co-organizers, and that it maintains an intermediate-plus language competency requirement. In addition, at least in general, participants steer the evening's conversations, not organizers. Word of mouth has proven highly effective as EPiL's primary recruitment technique. Some people, however, have instead learned about the group

thanks to Facebook, in cases where EPiL appeared as a suggestion to users as a result of Facebook algorithms.

A longstanding member recently expressed to me his opinion that EPiL succeeds by helping learners build the confidence they need to use English for purposes that they themselves find interesting, not just to execute grammar exercises correctly: “They keep learning without [the act of learning itself] being the main focus” That remark is reminiscent of the findings of Sprenger and Guerra Ramos (2018), who noted that members of the social learning language space that they had studied in Brazil had indicated their “attendance [was] due mainly to opportunities to meet and exchange ideas with more experienced peers” (p. 375). Indeed, by adhering to proven effective strategies and working to identify new ones, EPiL has earned a reputation as a space where second language speakers markedly improve their English in a non-intensive learning environment. As this article has shown, however, EPiL also thrives, in part, because it creates conditions for social capital to develop and multicultural networks to expand far beyond the back room of a well-liked cocktail bar in the deepest reaches of the Italian South.

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