

ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS' STRATEGIES FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION IN NON-IMMERSIVE CONTEXTS

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Abstract. *This article explores the autonomous strategies employed by adult learners of English in non-English-speaking environments to develop oral communication skills. The theoretical framework integrates principles of autonomous learning (Little, 2001), the sociocognitive approach to L2 acquisition (Atkinson, 2002), the concept of languaging (Swain, 2006), and communicative competence theory (Richards, 2006). The study adopts a qualitative methodology based on surveys and interviews with 20 Russian-speaking adults residing in Israel. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results identify three main types of strategies: structured individual learning, group learning, and informal participation in language communities. The most effective formats involved live interaction with native speakers in informal contexts and small-group conversational learning with pedagogical support. Less effective were text-based chats and inconsistent language exchanges. The discussion underscores the importance of combining personal initiative, cognitive engagement, social sensitivity, and professional support. These findings can inform the design of support programs for adult L2 learners in non-immersive contexts.*

Keywords. *Adult learners, teaching strategies, non-immersive context*

JEL Classification J240

INTRODUCTION

In contexts where the target language (L2) is not part of daily life, adult language learners (LLs) face specific challenges in developing oral skills, which require both cognitive effort and social awareness (Atkinson, 2002). Without a natural language environment, adult learners must seek or create practice opportunities independently, demanding a high degree of autonomy, motivation, and strategic learning management (Little, 2001; Oxford, 1990).

Autonomous development of oral communicative competence is one of the most demanding aspects of English language learning outside immersion, necessitating reflective abilities, goal setting, and strategic alignment with learners' personal needs and resources. This article aims to identify and analyze strategies used by adult learners to improve their English speaking skills in a non-English-speaking environment.

The study draws on the theoretical foundations of autonomous learning (Little, 2001) and communicative competence (Richards, 2006), and incorporates the sociocognitive perspective on L2 acquisition (Atkinson, 2002) and the concept of "languaging" (Swain, 2006), which emphasizes the importance of language use in the acquisition process.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on qualitative analysis of written surveys and oral interviews with 20 Russian-speaking adults (N=20), aged 28 to 55, living in Israel and studying English outside an

immersive environment. All participants had secondary or higher education and English proficiency levels between A2 and B2.

The survey included open-ended questions about learning environments, interaction with teachers and peers, lesson structure and content, learning pace, and satisfaction with oral communication progress. In-depth interviews explored learners' autonomous speaking strategies.

A five-point Likert scale was used to assess satisfaction. Data collection and analysis followed the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling the identification of key strategy categories, their functions, frequency, and perceived effectiveness (speaking with and without native speakers in both home and foreign environments) from the learners' perspective.

RESULTS

Three main types of oral communication development strategies emerged:

- Structured Individual Learning, including sessions with professional teachers (native or native-level speakers) delivered in offline, online, and phone formats.
- Group Learning, involving in-person and online classes in small and large groups.
- Informal Participation in Language Communities, such as language exchanges, conversation clubs, online forums, and cultural events.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

Offline lessons with professional teachers—native and non-native speakers with near-native proficiency—provided learners with flexible topic selection, personalized pacing, and feedback. While offering professional guidance and individualized support, this format lacked peer interaction and was often costly.

Online video lessons (via Zoom, Meet, Skype; e.g., iTalki, British Council Meet) enabled topic flexibility and integrated reading and writing. However, the absence of peer interaction remained a drawback.

Phone lessons (e.g., Jerusalem Post Lite Talk) offered flexibility and native speaker interaction, but lacked a structured curriculum and integration of other language modalities.

GROUP LEARNING

Small Russian-speaking groups (5–6 participants) with native-speaking teachers, held at language schools (e.g., Unlimited Knowledge), facilitated targeted oral practice, vocabulary development, storytelling, personal experience sharing, and language games (Hampel & Stickler, 2012). These conditions were favorable for developing communicative competence through active participation.

Online groups led by Russian-speaking teachers with native-level proficiency (e.g., ID English) tailored explanations to common difficulties among Russian-speaking learners. Challenges included varied proficiency levels, a lack of structured programs, and limited personalization.

Programs offered by institutions from English-speaking countries (e.g., British Council Club Adults) were praised for structure, professionalism, and exposure to different accents. However, they lacked individualization and pacing flexibility.

Professional online courses (e.g., OPEN by the U.S. Department of State; MOOCs) for educators and professionals included written tasks and listening activities with diverse speakers.

Communication occurred via chat and forums, approximating spontaneous dialogue through structured writing tasks.

INFORMAL LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

Online language exchanges (Speakly, Tandem, HelloTalk, ConversationExchange) facilitated interaction with native speakers through video and text, combining learning and intercultural dialogue. Reciprocal conversations covered everyday topics, fostering paraphrasing, spontaneous speech, dialogic skills, and cultural awareness. Difficulties included finding suitable partners and maintaining boundaries in non-personalized contexts.

Group exchanges (online/offline, e.g., Tel Aviv Cool Language Exchange) involved topic discussions, photo descriptions, and cultural dialogue. Hebrew-speaking Russians found more opportunities for live interaction, though time demands were high.

Conversation clubs, tandem meetups, themed forums, and social media groups (e.g., The Warmth of Home on Facebook) encouraged written and optional spoken interaction on themes like travel, friendship, humor, and nostalgia. Posts, though brief, resembled spoken discourse, though language depth was limited.

Online games with voice chat (e.g., Discord, Fortnite) enabled spontaneous English use in real-time. However, these environments were skewed young, were lexically narrow, and carried risks of adopting errors from non-native peers.

Cultural events hosted by English-speaking Israeli organizations (ESRA, IBCA) included lectures, concerts, plays, seminars, tours, and book clubs, offering immersive moments and spontaneous interaction. These activities promoted familiarity with diverse speech models and approached natural immersion.

Participants highlighted that direct involvement in cultural activities provided sustained contact and deeper engagement with speech practices, recognized as the most effective strategy for oral and cultural development due to access to authentic interaction.

Volunteering with native speakers (e.g., in healthcare or government translation) offered meaningful interaction but posed logistical and scheduling challenges.

DISCUSSION

Participants identified the most productive strategies as those enabling substantive interaction with native speakers in live contexts, such as plays, celebrations, workshops, tours, and book clubs. These findings align with prior research emphasizing the value of meaningful oral interaction in L2 development (Swain, 2000).

Live communication in small groups with structured programs and teacher support was also rated effective. Moderate satisfaction was associated with online individual lessons, cultural events, and structured language courses lacking consistent speech practice.

Text chats, gaming platforms, and irregular exchanges were considered least effective, suggesting that access to materials or digital environments without live interaction is insufficient for meaningful oral skill development.

Many participants combined strategies, blending individual and group formats to meet personal needs and compensate for the lack of immersion.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, motivated adult learners in non-immersive settings can access diverse digital, communicative, and experiential strategies and choose combinations aligned with their learning preferences and available resources.

The findings offer a foundation for developing methodological recommendations to support autonomous oral communication development among adults in non-immersive environments.

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