

## **An Insider View: Understanding Volunteers' Experiences Within a Peer-to-Peer Language Learning Program in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside**

Natalia Balyasnikova  
*York University*

### **Abstract**

Many community-based English language learning programs rely on volunteers to lead classes. While some of these volunteers have some teacher training, the majority are not professional educators. The question of how non-professionals understand what constitutes facilitation of language learning in an adult education context remains underexplored. This paper presents the findings of a small-scale study conducted within a community-based language learning program with four volunteer facilitators. Volunteer facilitators were interviewed on a range of topics related to their role in the program, peer-to-peer interaction, and the impacts of volunteering in their lives. An analysis of facilitator interviews, with reference to program's guiding educational principles, reveals the following positive factors related to the program: the informal nature of the community, the flexible design of the program, peer-to-peer interaction, and support from program staff. However, the findings also highlight that facilitators' perspectives and practices varied significantly due to their different lived experiences, motives for volunteering, and linguistic background. This study highlights promising practices, which could serve to design sustainable community-based English language learning programs for adults.

### **Introduction**

Focusing on one program offered at the UBC Learning Exchange—the English Conversation—this research had a goal to understand the experiences of former learners who feel empowered to begin leading classes within language learning programs. By drawing on interviews with five volunteers in the English Conversation—an English language program offered within the UBC Learning Exchange to the residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside—this study presents a different and rare perspective on the nature of community-based literacy programs. I argue that if community-based English language programs are conceptualized as communities of practice, they might benefit from the peer-to-peer teaching practices and the involvement of both monolingual and multilingual volunteers.

### **Literature Review**

Adult immigrants learn the English language for a variety of reasons. Some do so for practical reasons, such as to communicate at work (Norton, 2013), while others learn so they can access opportunities within the community (Duff, Wong, & Early, 2000). Many do so to enhance their family literacy practices (Chao & Mantero, 2014) or for personal reasons. Reflecting on the purpose of English language learning in Canada, Morgan (2002) wrote that “in many ways language learning is simultaneously a process of individual and collective identity negotiation” (p. 157). If that is indeed an important factor to consider in language learning, then practices of language education should embrace it through variability and flexibility in curriculum and lesson delivery.

Many researchers suggest that community-based programs are aimed at social change and are emancipatory in nature. For example, studies which focus on learners' perceptions of community-based programs suggest that learners perceive reduced feelings of marginalization (Kim & Merriam, 2010), an increased sense of self-esteem (Bridwell, 2013), empowerment to affect change (Rivera, 2003), and community transformation (Coady, 2013) among the main outcomes of participation in community-based literacy programs. Research finds that literacy programs founded on holistic principles (Crowther, Maclachan, & Tett, 2010) and those that encourage a sense of belonging among students (O'Donnel & Tobbell, 2007) contribute to individual persistence in educational programs.

Free, to a certain extent, from government-mandated benchmarks, community-based programs become a fertile ground for the development of such practices. This freedom allows many centres to provide language practice in tandem with other forms of literacy. For example, community-based English language programs have served as a vehicle for developing health literacy in immigrant communities (Soto Mas, Ji, Fuentes, & Tinajero, 2015), receiving basic education classes (Rivera, 1999), raising awareness of mental health issues among language learners (Rusch, Frazier, & Atkins, 2015), and processing trauma (Finn, 2010).

Community-based language learning programs are heterogeneous in their student body and are often open to learners with varying levels of English language proficiency. Adult learners benefit from pedagogical practices that encourage active negotiations of understanding and co-construction of meaning in mixed groups (Bremer, 1996) and scaffold their learning with support from peers. As learners move between home and language learning class, they take on different linguistic identities (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002) and strategically utilize them in various ways (Hardman, 1999). By allowing learners to draw upon their experiences, linguistic background, shared cultural traditions, and expectations from the program, community-based language learning programs may additionally contribute to an atmosphere of shared respect between native and non-native English speakers and create closer ties between the language learning classroom and surrounding community.

While there are not many studies that look at learners-turned-facilitators, there is a substantial body of research in the fields of sociology and psychology that looks at individual motivation to volunteer. Early research suggests that a high percentage of volunteer work is episodic in nature and does not correlate to an initial intention to volunteer (Dunn, Chambers, & Hyde, 2015). In addition, the motivation to volunteer depends on multiple reasons: it can be driven by the search for "a rewarding experience" (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991, p. 281) or can be seen as a reflection of self-perceived relationships with others (Clary et al., 1998; Willems et al., 2012). It is worth mentioning, however, that these studies privilege volunteers with economic and educational advantages, and that is why it is important to look at the community members and/or former participants of learning programs, and their rationalisation for volunteering in community-learning programs.

A study conducted with women enrolled in community-based programs found that those programs which foster community and, in the words of one participant, "feel like a little family" (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009, p. 335), may improve the learning experience and provide support for learners. Similar arguments come from a study by Crowther, Maclachlan, and Tett (2010)

which found that accessible, informal programs built on flexible curriculum and structured around peer group work enabled “vulnerable adults to forge the identities to which they aspire” (p.663), thus empowering them beyond the literacy program and affecting their communities. Other forms of literacy also flourished in community-based organizations. Coady (2013) worked with 40 adults involved in a community-based health literacy program, specifically focusing on peer-to-peer interaction between program patrons. She found that the informal nature of the program enabled learners to connect with each other, which in turn prompted them to “envision change” (p.327) and take a more active role in their communities. Coady concluded that interaction with peers is “powerful and transformative for adults” (p.330) and argued for collective transformative learning that fostered community-building. Buckland’s (2010) study with socially disadvantaged Canadians showed that it was institutional barriers that constrained adults developing financial literacy, and a study by Tisdell et al. (2013) found that community-based literacy programs allowed teachers to develop a deeper understanding of the sociocultural context of learners’ lives, in which race, ethnicity, gender, and class play an important role for ways of knowing.

Connection with peers through informal work was highlighted in a study conducted in a senior-focused literacy program (Kim & Merriam, 2010), specifically a computer literacy class in South Korea. Research found that seniors, especially due to their age, rely on peers to overcome feelings of marginalization and being on the periphery. By working together, seniors reported an increase in positive self-judgement and a growth in self-esteem. A similar study conducted with seniors in Australia found that informal hands-on learning with peers resulted in “particularly therapeutic” (Golding, 2011, p.117) outcomes for older men who were excluded from formal continuing education programs. Looking at informal spaces for learning, such as community gardens, Shan & Walter (2015) showed how these contact zones foster everyday multiculturalism that contrasts with official rhetoric. Shan and Walter found that despite limited English language proficiency, Chinese women were able to actively engage with their Canadian peers in this unique learning space. Calling a community garden a “community of conviviality” (p. 8) Shan and Walter argued that participation in informal learning expanded immigrant women’s life space and allowed them to communicate beyond their English language proficiency.

### **Research Context**

To contextualize this study, I begin with a short description of the Vancouver neighbourhood in which the research was conducted. I follow with a brief overview of the community-engagement program, where the data were generated.

Located on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, the Downtown Eastside (DTES) is one of Vancouver’s oldest neighbourhoods. In addition to its First Nations community, the area is home to several cultural immigrant communities of Asian, African, European, and South American heritage. The DTES is comprised of several geographical spaces including Chinatown, Gastown, the Oppenheimer District, Strathcona, Thornton Park, Victory Square, and the Industrial Area. It is home to about 18,477 people. In terms of linguistic diversity, the majority of DTES residents speak English as their main language; however, Mandarin and Cantonese speakers comprise 28% of the total

DTES population. Not surprisingly given the population demographics, Chinatown has the largest number of Chinese-speaking residents. Vancouver's Chinatown was settled in the late nineteenth century and quickly grew to become one of the largest self-sustaining ethnic enclaves in North America. At the time of the research, this community was changing rapidly due to government-funded and private residential and commercial revitalization initiatives.

The UBC Learning Exchange is a community engagement initiative that was started to facilitate a relationship between the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the DTES community. The work at the centre has always been grounded in the principles of asset-based community development—an approach to community work that builds on the community's strengths, promising practices, gifts, and talents of its members. Rooted in this approach, the UBC Learning Exchange strives to support diverse communities in the DTES.

The English Conversation program is one of many offerings available at the UBC Learning Exchange. This program, which began in 2004, is open to Canadian citizens, new immigrants, and refugees. It delivers more than 30 classes a week to nearly 400 learners per year. More than 50% of the learners are Chinese-speaking seniors many of whom live in the DTES. A number of learners commute from other parts of Vancouver and have diverse cultural heritages (Balyasnikova, Gillard, Korcheva, 2018).

The program is run by volunteer facilitators, many of whom are not professionally trained language instructors. In addition, the program expends immense effort to support learners who attend the classes and the volunteers who facilitate them. For example, some learners are encouraged to take up leadership positions and facilitate lower level classes and the facilitators are offered multiple development opportunities and socializing activities.

The program is divided into three levels of English language proficiency. English as an additional language (EAL) conversation groups meet once a week for ten weeks in 75-minute sessions to discuss a range of topics that are chosen by the senior coordinator. These topics include cultural holidays, Canadian traditions and customs, popular culture, famous people, etc. During each session, learners use prepared worksheets with short text and follow-up questions that guide their conversation. The role of the facilitator in the class is to encourage learners to speak as much as they can. This is why facilitators are free to choose topics that they think could be interesting to learners in their group.

As mentioned, classes at the English Conversation are facilitated by volunteers, many of whom are not professionally trained language instructors; a large number of facilitators are language learners themselves. Many of these facilitators are women, who are either retired or currently not employed. Some of the facilitators are former learners of the program who have advanced to the higher levels of proficiency and now facilitate lower-level classes. Given that most facilitators do not have substantial pedagogical training, there is a requirement for them to participate in ten workshops led by the senior coordinator. These workshops give volunteers a basic understanding of pedagogy and the philosophy behind the English Conversation. They also provide volunteers with a chance to discuss the goals of the EAL program and give them an opportunity to learn about classroom management techniques. After the completion of training workshops, facilitators are assigned a group of learners (usually 10 people) and start leading

classes. In addition to facilitating, some volunteers are encouraged to participate in other activities that take place in the UBC Learning Exchanges.

Learners in the English Conversation are mostly senior residents of Vancouver. They are allowed to take one class per session. However, they are free to spend time at the centre socializing with other learners and facilitators. Some learners use this opportunity to help their peers learn other skills; others spend time reading magazines and newspapers available on the premises. Some learners volunteer to lead classes, e.g., guitar or crafts classes. In these cases, EAL facilitators who attend these classes switch roles with EAL learners, and assume the role of student. I argue that the main characteristic of the English Conversation is the multilayered and fluid nature of facilitator/learner roles; the facilitators and the learners are engaged in a collaborative learning practice that constructs and sustains this unique community.

### Data Generation

The goal of the study was to explore volunteers' experiences within the English language program. In addition, it was equally as important to understand how their experiences inform program curricula and aid in setting of new goals for the program—in other words, to establish the reciprocal relationship between the program design and the flexible nature of the learner/facilitator role. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the participants' perceptions of their role within the English Conversation?
2. What are the participants' relationships with the learners, fellow facilitators, and staff of the centre?

Given that this study was conducted within a community-based organization, I grounded it in the understanding that the co-created nature of knowledge privileges the community members' participation at all stages of the research process and drew on principles of community-based research<sup>1</sup>, particularly appreciative inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry, which is gaining prominence in educational research (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009), was used as the starting point of my study to counter the deficit-based and academic research typically brought to research undertaken in community-based settings. The principles of appreciative inquiry place research first and foremost as a collaborative endeavour (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004). Originating in social constructivist approaches to organizational studies and activist interventions (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995) this methodology seeks to ensure that research increases the organizational capacity of the community in ways that are both meaningful and positive.

The participants of this study were current volunteer facilitators at the English Conversation. In order to be included in the sample, they had to have attended at least one learning activity offered by UBC Learning Exchange. In other words, they must have been

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<sup>1</sup> Among the many principles of community-based research, reciprocity plays an important role. For this reason, studies in community-based settings are conducted not only for the sake of obtaining knowledge, but to support the partner organizations or people. In this study, in addition to answering research questions, I also communicated findings to the staff of the UBC Learning Exchange in order to build upon identified promising practices.

learners who decided to take on the role of a facilitator. I was helped by the EAL program coordinators in the recruitment of EAL volunteer facilitators. We met prior to sending out the recruitment letters and discussed which EAL facilitators would be willing to participate in the study. Following our meeting, the coordinators approached potential participants and introduced me as a researcher working for the English Conversation. I met with each participant individually and explained the purpose of the research project. In the end, five facilitators agreed to take part in the study. Two facilitators spoke English as their first language and did not speak any other languages. They were residents of Vancouver's Downtown East Side and prior to taking up a facilitator role participated in other literacy activities offered by the UBC Learning Exchange. In this study, I refer to these participants as *monolingual facilitators*. Three participants who spoke EAL were all former learners at English Conversation. To my knowledge, in addition to English, one of these participants spoke Mandarin, another spoke Mandarin and Cantonese, and the third one spoke Farsi. I refer to these participants as *multilingual facilitators*.

To generate the data for the study, I drew on the principles of narrative interviewing (Wengraf, 2001) during time spent with the volunteers. This approach to data collection allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences in their preferred style of interaction. Following Wengraf (2001), I based my interviews on the following principles of narrative interviewing:

1. Conceptual openness. The interview started with a single question (e.g., "Tell me about your experience at English Conversation"), which aimed to elicit a narrative from the participant as they chose to tell it. Once they had finished answering the first question, I followed up with a second question, in which I asked for clarification of some of the topics that came up in the first account.
2. Communication and active listening. I designed conversational protocols to act as flexible guides and topic starters in order to encourage the narratives. Rather than asking for opinions or using questions that asked why, the protocols helped me probe for information that pertained to memorable events in the participant's life
3. Free development of the narrative. When deciding on the way to conduct interviews with the research participants, I was faced with the dilemma of whether to control their narratives for the benefit of my research or to let the narratives unfold as the participants saw fit. Rather than following a question and answer protocol, I decided to frame my interviews as narrative occasions to encourage the participant to tell their story. This allowed the narrator to move back and forth within the narration, which at times created confusion and misunderstanding, changed what had previously been said, even produced contradictions. At the same time, this method allows the narrator to speak in their own unique way.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim for the following analysis. I offered to give transcripts to the participants for member checking purposes. However, only one participant expressed his interest in reviewing his interview and subsequently made 20 changes in the transcript. It is important to note that none of these changes affected the general account of the events in his interview.

## Data Analysis and Findings

The nature of this research necessitated a qualitative approach to data analysis. I analyzed the interviews following qualitative manual coding techniques (Saldaña, 2013). There are three main groups of findings, which are aligned with the research questions. The first group answers the question regarding participants' perceptions of their role within the English Conversation. The second group gives the volunteers' view of the program, its goals, and the structure and role that the staff plays in supporting their teaching efforts. The third group highlights the changes in participants' lives as connected to their volunteering as facilitators of language learning.

### Volunteers' Perceptions of their Roles and Position within the Community

Participants' views of their roles within the community seemed to be informed by their language status. In the interviews, the two monolingual facilitators distanced themselves from a teacher role, stressing the informal nature of their involvement with the program. For example, E.F.<sup>2</sup>, one of facilitators, who was starting his third semester teaching a higher level conversational class, described his work the following way:

E.F.: Well my role is a facilitator, not a teacher, not an instructor, not a professor. Um, a facilitator in my experience is basically kind of like my own words is "chairing a meeting," so just being sure that we stay in time with each topic so we can complete the lesson, which is referring to the material that we cover within the hour or an hour and a half.

However, E.F. mentioned that he learned such understanding of his status in the program during the facilitator training workshops, where the program coordinator emphasised the non-hierarchical nature of the facilitator-learner relationship and encouraged the volunteers to engage in self-reflection about how they would sustain it in their classes. In his own words:

E.F.: My experience is really to follow the guidelines that set out to be a facilitator, not a teacher, and when someone calls me teacher, which happened a couple of times this morning, I say "No, my name is not teacher, I am a (...)." So that's my experience of what my role is, as I define is to go by guidelines that are set out in our training. So pretty much, to be accessible, to be approachable um to be inquisitive...

Another monolingual facilitator, A.B., shared a similar interpretation of his role, as one of a facilitator who helps and guides conversations in the class.

A.B.: You are supposed to be a facilitator and the word facilitate means to make easier. So yeah, you are kinda a facilitator. You are supposed to get people involved and talking. It's conversational English.

A.B. was one of the oldest volunteers at the English Conversation, and he was one of the first facilitators who underwent the facilitator training offered by the program. He described it as a positive and helpful experience; however, due in part to a longer volunteering experience, A.B.

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<sup>2</sup> This and all further initials are pseudonyms, chosen to protect the identity of the research participants.

actively criticized the emphasis of the “non-teacher” approach to facilitation introduced at these workshops. Reflecting on the time spent in the workshops, A.B. described them as prescriptive and non-engaging:

A.B.: We did learning styles, and we did reading, and vocabulary, we did things about conflict resolution, learned difference between a teacher and a facilitator... we spent about three hours on that! That was the most boring. I said to the teacher, if I ever hear about the teacher and the facilitator, I will never come back! I thought it was a bit too excessive.

Despite his negative reaction to the offered training, A.B. still accepted facilitator as the most appropriate label to describe his engagement with language learners mainly due to the fact that he did not view the English Conversation as a “real English” language learning program. He equated the process of teaching to explicit grammar instruction that is delivered by professionals with degrees in English or in teaching, which he did not possess. At the same time, while A.B. admittedly had no passion for the subject of English language teaching methodology, he still saw the value of his work. For him it centred on serving as a source of knowledge for the students who attended the language class. He described the interaction in the class the following way:

A.B.: Maybe they ask about some vocabulary, you know. What do you call it: a teacher, an instructor, it doesn't really matter. But you have these workshops about teacher-facilitator, oh God! Never want it again! /.../ I have quite a bit of courses, but I don't have a teaching degree, so I stick with this. /.../ Yeah English was my worst subject, so I am coming from a—I still—but this is not really English. It's not like studying Shakespeare. /.../ For people who want to—90% of people don't want grammar either, but there is always somebody, maybe have a bit of grammar for six weeks or something. Just teacher, grammar, you know. It might help students and facilitators.

As monolingual facilitators, who have taken other classes at the UBC Learning Exchange, both A.B and E.F. saw their volunteering as a valuable experience for them and for the learners. They distanced themselves from the teacher role, stressing that their role was to guide the classes and act as resources for learning the language. However, they seemed to lack understanding what constitutes language learning or what challenges that learners might face and their motivation to learn English.

Multilingual facilitators offered perspectives different from those of monolingual ones. Most commonly they referred to their work as “teaching.” For example, one of the facilitators for the lower level classes, K.L., put it the following way:

K.L: I know that it is difficult for the older people to, senior people, to learn another language. It is very hard to pick up. So I have to teach them slowly and try to explain them in Chinese, to offer these explanations.

Being a senior himself, K.L. seemed to have certain empathy towards the learners and adapted his facilitation style to their needs. Other multilingual facilitators drew on their own experiences as language learners in the program to model the way they interact with the learners

in their classes. are more proactive in encouraging learners to speak English outside the classroom, by giving them “homework.” For example, in two separate interviews, facilitators R.A. and C.D. shared similar approaches:

R.A.: I try to help my learners learn useful sentences, real life experiences, like going to a doctor or ordering at the restaurant. Even though, I can be not confident, I try to be helpful. I try to push them to speak English, to get involved... not to be afraid. They shouldn't be shy.

C.D.: I tell them to practice and all that, they won't do it. For various reasons, not that they are right or wrong. So you gotta understand it... so repeat and repeat and repeat. Like, how do you expect them to use the word dialogue... I can make them read it. But if now, they are not going to say it, never. And you got to put on them a little bit of pressure, you know.

In addition, these facilitators point out the value of English for learners' successful integration into Canadian society. In the words of K.L.:

K.L.: I think you try to show the people you're teaching to become to adapt to Canadian way of life, something like that.

Other multilingual volunteers shared similar sentiments, which were supplemented by an altruistic attitude towards their work and empathy towards the learners:

K.L.: I wish they could learn some English, when they go out shopping, they could talk. They could use these common words. That could help them a little bit. I can at least help them with something.

Some facilitators expressed that the value of their work lies in enjoying the exchange of knowledge with learners, as in case of E.F. and A.B., who enjoyed learning in their classes from about other traditions, ways of being and knowing:

E.F.: My experience is um I have been probably receiving more benefit, probably than probably students. I am volunteering I am like a student. So I have developed quite a bit.

For multilingual volunteers, this sense of accomplishment and helping others was supplemented by their own increased confidence in speaking English. R.A. specifically talked about her experience as a language learner supporting other learners.

R.A.: [I feel greater] confidence, in general. Happiness, I am happier in the Learning Exchange. Learners treat me well. I feel that I am useful. I feel good.

Monolingual volunteers also acknowledged that volunteering at the English Conversation affected the way they think about the language. E.F. mentioned that he started speaking slower in his interactions with language learners, and A.B. spoke about an increase in his meta-language awareness in terms of grammar and language structure. Experience in

working with senior language learners encouraged both of these volunteers to be more patient and understanding.

In sum, shared experiences shaped the way three multilingual facilitators interacted with the learners. There seemed to be a certain feeling of empathy as all three facilitators shared that they tried being helpful and patient with the learners. They also shared that they tried holding them to high standards, yet not embarrassing them for the misuse of a word or phrase.

### **Volunteers' Views of the Program, Its Structure, and the Role of the Staff**

The analysis of the five interviews suggested that overall all the volunteers had a positive view of the English Conversation as a whole. All the facilitators described the program as both structured in course material and accommodating in regard to their time and preferred days they could commit to volunteering. To illustrate, this is how K.L. compared English Conversation to another program where he used to volunteer:

K.L.: This is more organized. I used to pick whatever I can get. It was only for one hour. And here... they prepare the lessons, so I don't have the headache. I think this is better. And also there are so many intelligent people here, I can ask for help. This benefits me and helps me. There is more support.

The fact that the English Conversation had pre-planned curricula was addressed by all three multilingual participants, while the monolingual ones spoke positively about the flexibility of the schedules and different options to volunteer within the program:

E.F.: I will try to be short and sweet. I don't... the Learning Exchange has been really accommodating with my schedule, what really works for me right now.

All facilitators addressed the support that they received from other volunteers as well as from the program staff. Moreover, three participants mentioned that it was the individual encouragement of the English Conversation staff that helped them to take on a more active role in the community. When I asked them about what made them consider becoming facilitators, they answered:

K.L.: To participate? I guess in my case, because I was encouraged by that Korean lady and [staff member].

E.F.: Um, yeah, I suppose I guess [program coordinator] helped me by giving me all the information, because I thought it was grammar and well I don't know, I said I am not a teacher, she said well that's it's conversation [rather than formal grammar teaching].

C.D.: ...later I got involved. There was also a workshop with [the staff], they are very nice. Because a lot of people, I like the people here.

At the same time, the interviews suggest that there was lack of interaction among facilitators themselves beyond the pre-volunteering training. According to the participants, there

were several reason for this. Some facilitators related the lack of interaction among facilitators with their busy lifestyles and time constraints. For example, A.B. facilitated classes early in the morning and had to leave to work right after the class was over. R.A. lived far from the UBC Learning Exchange and had to take care of her young child. She was unable to participate in any activities beyond the classes that she facilitated. However, the facilitators highlighted that despite the lack in everyday facilitator interaction, they sensed a community spirit within the walls of the program. They mentioned feeling accepted and welcomed, as in the case of E.F.:

E.F.: Community spirit, yeah yeah, there is a community spirit. Yeah, I was totally accepted by pretty much everyone, a very welcoming and acceptable, for me that is a community spirit.

On the other hand, two facilitators described the community as one in which “everyone does their own thing.” It seems that after the end of mandatory facilitator training none of the participants were able to find opportunities to interact with their peers, despite the fact that some of them spend considerable time at the UBC Learning Exchange, participating in other educational programs. As A.B. jokingly put it:

A.B.: And there are no meetings, there are no forms, no facilitator conferences, we should have a big facilitator conference in Las Vegas. That’s an idea: a big international facilitator conference. Here is your plane ticket! There are a lot of facilitators here, but they don’t have a conference.

Analysis of volunteer interviews shows that volunteers’ main motivation stems from their perceived need to give back. It can be giving back to the society at large, as in case of C.D.:

C.D.: I am so far away, you know, so I want to be useful to the society and I am grateful for what I have from the Canadian government. OK? I appreciate it, so I want to contribute in a small way.

In the case of E.F., volunteering is a way to repay the university for his funded education in lieu of making a donation:

E.F.: I benefited big time from the free university, this course, and I would have loved to donate some money, I would have loved to do that, /.../ So I thought, ok here is an opportunity to give back... maybe some of my time.

Overall, the experiences of facilitators at the UBC Learning Exchange are seen as enjoyable and do benefit individuals who feel the need to support the learners and to learn with and from them. Both monolingual and multilingual volunteers seek to help others; volunteers who were themselves language learners seek to “give back” to the community, monolingual facilitators rethink the ways they thought about language due to their facilitating experience. However, despite the community feel and individual benefits of the program, participants still view their volunteering as an individual activity within the UBC Learning Exchange.

## Conclusion and Implications

The three main findings of this study were as follows. First, my analysis suggests that while monolingual volunteers were very approachable and equality-oriented, multilingual volunteers had more understanding of what it takes to learn a language (e.g., pushing learners to do homework). Second, all participants expressed positive feelings towards the English Conversation and the support they received from the staff. At the same time participants did not take up identities of professional educators or language experts, thus maintaining the peer-to-peer nature of their engagement with the learners, and although they were engaged in the collaborative and supportive processes of a community of practice, they did not explicitly describe themselves as sharing a craft or profession. Finally, while the program staff strives to create a community of practice among the facilitators, there is still more to be done though encouraging regular professional interaction and cooperation towards achieving shared goals. A community of practice is an informal organization, comprised of people, who “deepen their knowledge and expertise in [one] area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002, p.4). Characterized by mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire, a community of practice shapes the identities of its participants through their participation in shared activities. Wenger and Snyder (2000) wrote that while communities of practice are not located in one specific context and are “as diverse as the situations that give rise to them” (p. 141), they have specific characteristics that distinguish them from formal groups or informal networks. The purpose of a community of practice is to develop individual potential by encouraging knowledge exchange among members who “select themselves” (p. 142). Most importantly, a community of practice is maintained by the commitment of the individuals and their interest in sustaining their group.

Indeed, there were some indicators that the creation of a community of practice could be possible. The facilitators were engaged in a joint enterprise of facilitating English language conversational groups, and, due to a pre-established curriculum, shared a repertoire, both pedagogical and conceptual. They participated in shared activities, such as facilitator training workshops, and some felt the necessity to continue doing so. As facilitators moved from the novice status to a more experienced one, they tended to challenge established norms (as it was in the case of A.B.), while still relying on those who are located in the centre of the community—the staff and work-and-learn students—for support in some cases. More importantly, multilingual facilitators maintained their roles as learners, albeit more experienced ones, in their interaction with novice learners. I would argue that the program could encourage further facilitator collaboration. At the time of my study, the volunteers dictated their schedules and while there were offerings of professional development, team teaching opportunities, and social events, I could not find any collaboration which took place between the facilitators.

Further, this study revealed that for former and current patrons of literacy programs, a change towards a facilitator role can result in a more open and compassionate demeanor towards their community and language learners who constitute it. Some participants in this study experienced qualitative changes in the way they speak English; others felt effects of volunteering in their everyday interactions outside the UBC Learning Exchange. The growth of self-esteem, self-confidence and the inspiration to help that participants of this study reported as outcomes of their volunteer work are consistent with the work of Bridwell (2013) and Rivera (2003). At the

same time, this study adds to existing research due to its focus on learners-turned-volunteers, not exclusively learners. My analysis suggests that the facilitators within the program had a sense that they are part of a community, which is perhaps the greatest strength of English Conversation.

The broad purpose of this study was to understand how volunteers at the English Conversation see their role in the program, given its purported community nature and flexible design. Further, this study addressed the largely underexplored learning contexts that serve adults from marginalized backgrounds. The findings suggest that while facilitators at the English Conversation had diverse motives for volunteering, as former patrons of free literacy programs, they shared the experience of learning: trying to learn a new language at a mature age (in case of multilingual facilitators) and trying to gain access to education (in case of monolingual facilitators). Moreover, the feeling of being needed and being in demand sustained their involvement with the program. In addition, the variation in participants' responses highlights the differences in how monolingual and multilingual facilitators experience language learning and teaching, especially in programs that aim to support vulnerable populations of language learners. The monolingual facilitators' insistence that learners were their equals and the multilingual facilitators' concern that learners may need to be pushed to use English outside of the conversation group highlight how different lived experiences of language learning and use in Canadian context might impact teaching style in the classroom.

The findings of this study may be useful for program administrators and evaluators who seek to get a better understanding of how volunteering influences facilitators who work at similar programs. These findings attest to the power of community in language learning contexts where the facilitators grow and develop alongside the learners.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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