

Two Birds With One Stone: Informal Social Activities As A Tool To Enhance Language Skills Among Adult Learners

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Abstract

Learning to speak a new language in adulthood can be a particularly daunting and demanding experience, not only because of the difficulty that can be encountered when forming correct sentences, finding the right words and speaking with confidence, but also due to the psychological and social challenges that accompany later-life learning. Unlike children, adult learners rarely develop speaking skills naturally through exposure alone. Children are able to experiment with language through repeated trial and error, largely free from fear of judgement, and tend to pick up new patterns more easily at a younger age. Adult learners, by contrast, must contend with fear of making mistakes, reduced confidence, limited time, and a growing dependence on others in everyday situations. It is common to see older adults relying on children or grandchildren to facilitate routine interactions in supermarkets, healthcare settings, or public services, a reality that highlights how closely language ability is linked to independence, dignity, and social participation.

In response to these challenges, this article looks at the role of informal social activities in supporting the development of speaking skills among adult foreign language learners, alongside formal instruction. It suggests that socially embedded, low-pressure settings such as community conversation groups, book clubs and shared reading circles, volunteering, shared cultural activities, and online communication spaces can offer valuable opportunities to practise speaking in meaningful ways. In these contexts, communication is shaped by connection and shared purpose rather than judgement, allowing anxiety to ease and confidence to grow gradually through repeated, real-life use of language.

Drawing on intellectual, emotional, and sociocultural perspectives, this observational, analytical article considers how informal learning environments support the development of practical awareness, everyday communication strategies, and emotional resilience. It draws attention to the role of social trust, peer support, and real-world relevance in helping adult learners bring language use into their daily lives, particularly for those balancing work, caregiving responsibilities, and later-life transitions. By recognising formal and informal learning as complementary rather than separate, the article highlights the importance of socially situated learning pathways in strengthening speaking confidence, autonomy, and sustained participation among adult foreign language learners.

Keywords: Language, life transitions, Learners, Classroom-based techniques, social interactions.

Introduction

Learning to speak a foreign language is one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition, particularly for adult learners. One reason for this difficulty lies in the range of psychological and linguistic challenges learners must overcome, including fear of making mistakes, limited access to authentic communicative situations, and a lack of confidence. Although formal learning environments provide structure and systematic instruction, research indicates that these alone are often insufficient to produce sustained improvement in speaking proficiency.

Classroom-based techniques such as group work, discussions, role plays, and games offer learners opportunities to practice oral skills in supportive settings and at a controlled pace. However, the spontaneous and authentic nature of real-life language use extends beyond what is typically achievable in formal educational contexts. Informal activities—including social interactions, language clubs, drama groups, singing activities, and spontaneous conversations with fluent speakers—play a crucial role in helping learners develop and expand their speaking abilities (Zuo, 2024). In this regard, the psychological dimension of language learning is equally significant.

Informal social interactions reduce performance anxiety by shifting the focus away from evaluation and toward the fluidity of communication. Emotional stimulation derived from these interactions contributes to stronger memory formation and encourages sustained participation. Moreover, informal interaction makes speaking practice more enjoyable, which increases engagement and promotes meaningful participation (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Repeated informal social interactions also foster a sense of community, fulfilling learners' social needs and facilitating the integration of language use into daily routines.

Advances in technology have further enhanced informal learning opportunities. Social media platforms and digital communication tools support conversational practice, vocabulary development, and exposure to diverse language styles (Zuo, 2024). Online messaging groups, for instance, enable learners to engage in daily discussions with individuals from different geographical locations. Although disparities in online participation exist, studies consistently demonstrate positive links between online engagement and offline social interaction (Reeve, 2022). Nevertheless, existing research is often limited in scope and sample size, which restricts the generalizability of findings (Zuo, 2024). A practical concern highlighted across studies is learners' availability, including access to learning opportunities and convenience.

Formal language classes may be difficult for adults to attend regularly due to work schedules, family responsibilities, or other commitments (Reeve, 2022). In such cases, informal networking opportunities embedded within volunteering and community-based activities serve as valuable supplements rather than replacements for formal instruction. Outreach initiatives targeting workplaces or age-specific community groups illustrate how access points for engagement can be expanded (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). This approach parallels volunteer management strategies that employ multiple points of contact to enhance participation.

From a broader perspective, these contexts require a reimagining of pathways for speaking skill development. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) already emphasizes authentic communication and collaborative learning; extending such practices beyond the classroom into social and digital environments encourages a balance between structured practice and spontaneous language use. This balance is likely to enhance fluency and learner motivation due to increased personal relevance. Although prior studies report improvements associated with extracurricular and informal activities, gaps remain in understanding how informal contexts specifically contribute to adult learners' speaking development.

In particular, the lack of detailed demographic data in existing research makes it difficult to distinguish the effects of age, culture, and other socio-demographic variables. More robust research designs, including random sampling and larger, more diverse populations, have been recommended to address these limitations (Zuo, 2024). Such approaches could clarify which community-based frameworks are most effective for specific learner groups. For example, government-funded community integration programs and locally coordinated

conversation clubs paired with volunteer-led online language support illustrate the potential of multi-level social engagement (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). These initiatives suggest that language learning is most effective when opportunities extend beyond institutional settings and are embedded within community life.

Ultimately, effective speaking development depends on recognizing the dynamic relationship between the structured nature of classroom instruction and the flexible, authentic speaking opportunities found outside formal education. These domains should not be viewed as separate; rather, they reinforce one another in the pursuit of fluent and confident communication in real-world contexts (Zuo, 2024). By examining formal and informal learning as interconnected domains, researchers can develop more effective strategies to address the intertwined linguistic and socio-emotional needs of adult foreign language learners who balance multiple responsibilities.

Concept and Range of Speaking Skills

When adult foreign language learners describe their speaking abilities, they refer to a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional components. Fundamental elements of speaking skills include accurate and fluent speech, sufficient vocabulary, and appropriate grammatical control. However, effective communication extends beyond technical accuracy and encompasses additional dimensions such as adaptability, prosody, and contextual appropriateness (Zuo, 2024). Defining speaking proficiency solely in terms of mechanical accuracy is therefore insufficient. Without the ability to engage in meaningful interaction, a learner cannot be considered communicatively proficient.

Speaking proficiency includes the ability to initiate and sustain conversations, manage turn-taking, and, in classroom contexts, respond appropriately to predictable cues that signal comprehension or disagreement. Outside the classroom, these competencies are best developed and assessed through authentic interactions that require improvisation and spontaneous language use. Informal learning environments, such as conversation clubs and community-based group activities, support the development of these skills by incorporating real-time exchanges, adaptive communication, and collaborative interaction into speaking practice (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Accordingly, the scope of speaking skills includes both prepared and spontaneous speech.

Zuo (2024) emphasizes that the functional use of language involves navigating different registers. Learners may use informal language with friends and more formal or specialized language in professional contexts. Practice in informal conversational settings enhances sociolinguistic awareness and enables learners to experience shifts between registers. These varied language formats contribute to broader communicative competence by integrating social language norms with more formal linguistic conventions.

Another essential component of speaking proficiency is strategic competence, which refers to the use of communication strategies when learners encounter gaps in knowledge or breakdowns in understanding. Such strategies may include paraphrasing, the use of fillers (e.g., you know, like), or code-switching to maintain interaction. These strategies are commonly observed in conversation circles and volunteer-led activities, where facilitators support learners without eliminating communicative challenges (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Encouraging risk-taking in these environments, without excessive correction, helps learners develop resilience and confidence in communicative processes.

Learners' confidence in their speaking abilities significantly influences their willingness to participate actively in interactions. Anxiety reduction is therefore a central consideration in

speaking development. Activities such as drama workshops and group singing have been shown to increase learners' willingness to speak by framing oral production as enjoyable and expressive rather than evaluative (Zuo, 2024). Motivation levels are also shaped by the perceived relevance of learning content, with learners demonstrating higher engagement when activities align with their personal interests and social realities (Reeve, 2022). Consequently, the scope of speaking skills must encompass affective factors that influence both the frequency and quality of spoken practice.

In formal instructional contexts, educators play a critical role in shaping speaking opportunities. Instructors who provide timely feedback, encourage dynamic interaction, and ensure balanced participation are associated with more positive speaking outcomes (Ginzburg & Daniela, 2024). Although these characteristics are typically linked to classroom settings, they are also relevant to community volunteers who facilitate informal activities. Effective facilitators require enthusiasm, sensitivity to group dynamics, and the ability to sustain engagement among participants.

Overall, speaking skill development should be understood as an integrative process rather than the mastery of isolated linguistic elements. It emerges through the interaction of linguistic knowledge, strategic competence, affective factors, and social context. Research indicates that relaxed social interactions increase exposure to diverse discourse types and enhance understanding of conversational mechanics (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). For adult learners, participation in real or simulated informal environments supports the gradual expansion of expressive ability and situational comfort (Zuo, 2024).

Demographic factors further shape how speaking skills are developed and practiced. Age, caregiving responsibilities, and work schedules influence learners' availability and preferred modes of interaction (Reeve, 2022). While these factors may limit access to certain learning opportunities, they do not diminish the importance of consistent speaking practice. Instead, they highlight the need for flexible and context-sensitive approaches. Accordingly, speaking proficiency for adult foreign language learners can be defined as the ability to articulate ideas accurately and appropriately while interacting effectively with others in both structured instructional settings and unstructured community-based environments. This definition recognizes the psychological and social adaptability required to navigate a range of communicative contexts.

By integrating linguistic accuracy, interactive competence, strategic compensation, affective engagement, and contextual relevance, it becomes possible to design interventions that address both pedagogical goals and real-world communicative demands from a balanced, evidence-based perspective (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020; Zuo, 2024).

Contexts of Foreign Language Learning for Adults

Adult foreign language learning occurs across a wide range of contexts that vary in structure, accessibility, and communicative potential. These contexts are shaped by institutional settings, community design, and personal factors such as work schedules and family responsibilities (Reeve, 2022). In structured environments, including formal classrooms, learners follow predetermined curricula that emphasize vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and teacher-directed activities. Such settings provide systematic instruction and consistent opportunities for feedback. However, while predictability supports gradual skill development, it may also limit opportunities for spontaneous and flexible language use.

Beyond formal education, semi-structured contexts combine planned learning objectives with greater communicative flexibility. Examples include workplace-sponsored language programs and community initiatives that incorporate volunteer-led practice sessions. These contexts offer more adaptability than traditional classrooms while maintaining specific goals, such as professional communication or social integration. According to Gooch and Stevenson (2020), learners in these environments encounter diverse interpersonal dynamics, particularly when groups include participants with varying proficiency levels or native speakers. Volunteer facilitators often adjust activities and interaction patterns to accommodate individual interests and needs, thereby reducing systemic barriers and enhancing engagement.

Informal and unregulated learning environments provide additional opportunities for authentic language use. Conversation clubs held in cafés, cross-cultural activities organized by local governments, and peer-led online chat groups exemplify such contexts (Zuo, 2024). These environments are particularly effective in integrating spoken language into daily life because participation is typically low-cost, flexible, and voluntary. Communication in informal settings tends to be less anxiety-inducing, as errors are perceived as part of shared task engagement rather than as objects of formal evaluation (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Furthermore, informal contexts expose learners to pragmatic features of language, idiomatic expressions, and colloquial speech that are often underrepresented in textbooks but are essential for real-world fluency.

External factors, including public policy and health-related constraints, may influence whether instruction is delivered face-to-face, online, or through hybrid models (Ginzburg & Daniela, 2024). Preferences for instructional modes vary across demographic groups. Research suggests that older adults and individuals with lower levels of formal education tend to favor face-to-face instruction, whereas learners with higher educational attainment and many female learners prefer hybrid formats that combine online and in-person components. These differences underscore the need for diverse speaking opportunities that account for varying levels of technological familiarity and social comfort.

Online learning environments constitute a distinct context in adult foreign language acquisition. Video conferencing platforms enable real-time conversational practice, including turn-taking and interactive feedback, but they also require a baseline level of digital competence (Reeve, 2022). Challenges arise when learners lack access to private spaces, reliable internet connections, or technological training. To address these barriers, online programs may need to incorporate orientation modules that develop foundational digital skills before meaningful communicative practice can occur.

Community-based volunteer programs further illustrate the integration of social and linguistic goals. These initiatives often provide structured yet informal conversational opportunities embedded within shared activities, such as cooking or cultural events. Such designs promote stress-free interaction and naturally prompt speech through collaborative tasks. Importantly, volunteers themselves require institutional support. Regular communication with program coordinators helps volunteers sustain engagement and clarify role boundaries, particularly when addressing sensitive issues that fall outside their professional expertise (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020).

Digital social networks add another layer of complexity by enabling asynchronous and synchronous communication across geographical boundaries (Zuo, 2024). Group messaging platforms allow learners to practice written communication, which may gradually transition into voice messages or video interactions. This progression is especially

beneficial for adults with limited time for extended spoken practice, as written exchanges reduce pressure while maintaining regular exposure to the target language.

Overall, each learning context involves trade-offs between structured support and communicative spontaneity. Classroom settings emphasize accuracy and systematic progress tracking, whereas community-based and informal contexts prioritize fluency, emotional engagement, and adaptability. Hybrid formats attempt to balance these dimensions but must address inequalities in technological access and digital literacy (Reeve, 2022). Role-play activities in classrooms can simulate real-life interactions, yet they differ from informal conversations that require immediate lexical retrieval and spontaneous meaning construction (Zuo, 2024). Learners' responses to these contexts are shaped by individual confidence levels and preferences for structure or flexibility.

Ultimately, adult foreign language learning contexts are interrelated rather than discrete. Participation in informal activities alongside formal instruction creates synergistic effects that support comprehensive skill development (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Recognizing this interdependence enables educators and community organizers to design speaking opportunities that align linguistic objectives with socio-emotional needs, thereby fostering sustained engagement and communicative growth across diverse adult learner populations.

Informal Language Learning

Informal learning refers to situations in which learners develop language skills without direct teacher instruction in everyday social contexts. Such learning environments are typically free from formal assessment, socially embedded, and flexible in terms of participants, timing, and location. Informal language learning is inherently situational, requiring learners to respond dynamically to communicative and social demands (Zuo, 2024). A common example is community-based conversation or language meet up groups that prioritize active speech production over passive listening. In these settings, participants shape activities around shared interests, with language serving as a tool for collaboration and social engagement rather than as an explicit object of study (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020).

The primary goal of informal language learning is mutual understanding and relational engagement, rather than the attainment of immediate linguistic accuracy. Psychologically, this orientation reduces performance anxiety, as miscommunication is viewed as an opportunity for clarification rather than as an error subject to evaluation. Repeated participation in informal activities often leads to increased confidence, which Zuo (2024) attributes to relaxed environments that permit experimentation with diverse vocabulary and sentence structures. Volunteer-led programs are particularly effective in cultivating such conditions. Volunteers frequently organize social events or excursions centered on shared themes, intentionally prioritizing participants' comfort and inclusion. Support in these contexts may extend beyond linguistic assistance to include emotional encouragement and practical guidance, such as help navigating public transportation.

Informal learning environments also promote sustained engagement by embedding language use within meaningful social experiences. Learners are more likely to participate consistently when interactions are enjoyable, relevant, and socially rewarding. Over time, these experiences contribute to the integration of language use into learners' daily routines, reinforcing both communicative competence and social belonging. Unlike formal classrooms, informal settings allow learners to negotiate meaning in real time without the

constraints of predetermined curricula or evaluation criteria, thereby fostering greater flexibility and spontaneity in language use.

In addition, informal contexts provide rich opportunities for exposure to pragmatic and sociolinguistic features of language, including turn-taking conventions, politeness strategies, and culturally appropriate expressions. Such features are often acquired implicitly through observation and interaction rather than through explicit instruction. By engaging in authentic communicative situations, learners develop a more nuanced understanding of how language functions in diverse social settings. Consequently, informal learning plays a crucial role in complementing formal instruction by addressing aspects of communicative competence that are difficult to cultivate within structured educational environments.

Varieties of Informal Social Activities

A wide range of informal social activities can support adult foreign language learners in developing their speaking skills. These activities vary in interactional format and linguistic demands, offering learners multiple pathways for communicative engagement. Building on the interaction types discussed in Section 2.3, one prominent category includes conversational gatherings held in relaxed venues such as cafés, libraries, or private residences. These gatherings are often organized by community members or cultural associations with the aim of facilitating language integration among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Owing to the informal atmosphere, learners typically experience low levels of performance anxiety, as participation is not linked to formal assessment. Conversations may cover a broad range of topics, including personal experiences, hobbies, and community-related issues, allowing learners to practice language use at varying levels depending on context and interlocutors (Zuo, 2024).

Another category of informal social activity involves thematic or task-based group engagements in which language functions both as the medium of communication and as a supportive tool for completing a shared activity. Classes conducted in the target language exemplify this structure, as participants follow instructions, ask clarification questions, and comment while performing tasks (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Similar dynamics are evident in museum tours, art or craft workshops, sports activities, and gardening projects. In these contexts, speech production is integrated with physical action, which enhances vocabulary retention by linking words and phrases to concrete experiences rather than abstract explanations. This integration supports memory consolidation and strengthens contextual learning.

Book clubs as introduction to literature and culture

Book clubs and literary discussion circles provide a particularly powerful informal pathway for adult learners because they combine language use with cultural interpretation. When participants read short stories, poems, or accessible novels and then discuss characters, themes, narrative voice, and social values, the target language becomes a tool for meaning-making rather than a subject for correction. Literary texts also carry culturally specific references (e.g., humor, politeness, family roles, and social norms) that can be explored collaboratively, helping learners develop cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity alongside speaking confidence (Kramsch, 1993; Lazar, 1993). From a reader-response perspective, discussion-based reading encourages learners to articulate personal reactions,

justify interpretations, and negotiate meaning with others—moves that naturally expand evaluative and reflective language in talk (Rosenblatt, 1978).

To keep participation inclusive for busy adults, facilitators can select shorter texts, graded readers, or excerpts, and use light scaffolds such as a short “culture note,” vocabulary highlights, and optional discussion prompts. Roles (e.g., discussion leader, connector, summarizer, quote finder) can help balance turn-taking and support less confident speakers without turning the session into a classroom lesson. Over time, repeated literary talk encourages richer narrative and evaluative language (agreeing, interpreting, comparing, and expressing stance), while also giving learners a safe space to ask questions about everyday cultural practices represented in the text.

Civic engagement initiatives also constitute a significant form of informal social activity. Service-learning projects, such as volunteering at local shelters, participating in environmental cleanups, or organizing community fundraisers, create authentic communicative contexts that require interaction with native or proficient speakers (Norman & Eslami, 2024). In these situations, adults must adapt their speech to meet functional demands, such as coordinating tasks, providing explanations, or responding to unexpected situations. Linguistic unpredictability often necessitates paraphrasing or restructuring utterances when vocabulary is limited, thereby promoting strategic competence. These contexts are particularly valuable for developing goal-oriented speech relevant to professional and civic domains.

Language tandems represent another effective informal learning format. In these arrangements, learners from different linguistic backgrounds pair up to practice each other’s languages through reciprocal conversation (Lee, 2015). Tandem partners may meet in person or online, but in both cases, the interaction is structured around balanced participation. During tandem sessions, partners alternate between languages, allowing each participant to practice their target language while also serving as a linguistic resource for their partner. This reciprocal structure fosters equitable turn-taking and supports the development of interactive fluency.

Local immersion activities further expand opportunities for spontaneous communication. Public cultural events, festivals, and multilingual celebrations encourage brief, unscripted interactions as participants discuss performances, describe food, or comment on exhibits (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Such exchanges require rapid language production and immediate comprehension, reinforcing fluency and adaptability. Similarly, informal online activities provide diverse avenues for language practice. While real-time group video chats simulate live interaction, asynchronous communication channels—such as group messaging applications—allow learners to transition gradually from written to spoken production (Reeve, 2022). Learners may begin by contributing short text messages before progressing to voice notes or scheduled video conversations, a progression that supports those who are initially reluctant to engage in extended oral interaction.

Peer-led drama and music-based activities also offer rich contexts for informal language use. In informal drama groups, participants interpret scripts while improvising responses to evolving narratives, requiring linguistic flexibility, expressive range, and fluency beyond transactional speech (Zuo, 2024). Music-based activities, including singing and collaborative songwriting, integrate rhythm and melody into pronunciation practice and encourage creative lexical production (Ginzburg & Daniela, 2024). These activities heighten awareness of stress patterns, intonation, and articulation, contributing to improved comprehensibility.

Field trips designed around exposure to real-world language use combine multiple informal learning dimensions. Visits to historical landmarks, for example, naturally incorporate guided tours conducted in the target language, while unstructured intervals provide opportunities for interpersonal interaction among participants (Norman & Eslami, 2024). Facilitators may embed communicative mini-tasks, such as asking locals for directions, to promote authentic speaking opportunities. Hybrid informal activities that integrate face-to-face meetings with online interaction further support sustained engagement. Regular in-person sessions foster social connection, while online communication between meetings maintains conversational continuity despite scheduling or travel constraints (Reeve, 2022). Across all forms of informal social activity, relational dynamics emerge as a central factor influencing speaking development (Woltran & Schwab, 2025). Trust among participants facilitates the risk-taking necessary for advanced speech production, while collaborative tasks provide immediate semantic grounding. Dialogic reciprocity helps balance speaker and listener roles regardless of proficiency level. Consequently, diversified informal social activities serve as effective scaffolds that enable adult foreign language learners to improve speaking proficiency across varied situations while accommodating individual lifestyle constraints and psychological comfort levels.

Informal Language Learning within the context of socialization

Social and interpersonal relationships within informal language learning contexts play a crucial role in shaping adult learners' engagement, persistence, and spoken language development. In these environments, social dynamics function both as motivational forces and as structural scaffolds that support learning. Group relationships influence learners' confidence in attempting speech and affect the depth with which linguistic input is processed during interaction. Groups characterized by balanced reciprocity in speaking roles tend to foster positive perceptions of conversational turns as collaborative rather than corrective, thereby increasing learners' willingness to take communicative risks without heightened performance anxiety (Woltran & Schwab, 2025).

Facilitator competence is central to the development of productive social dynamics. Volunteer facilitators and peer leaders who are sensitive to subtle shifts in participation can balance dominant speaker roles and create equitable opportunities for all participants to contribute. Through gentle encouragement and inclusive practices, they support quieter learners while maintaining the natural flow of interaction (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Trust is a foundational element in these dynamics. When learners perceive fellow participants as empathetic and supportive, they are more inclined to experiment with unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical structures, even at the risk of error.

In contrast, environments lacking trust may lead learners to withdraw or remain silent. Cultural norms that favor restraint or silence in group discussions may further contribute to reduced participation (Norman & Eslami, 2024). Recognizing and accommodating such cultural patterns is essential for facilitators seeking to foster inclusive and supportive interactional spaces. Establishing clear expectations, modeling respectful communication, and validating diverse participation styles can mitigate these barriers.

Informal language learning contexts also encourage the development of peer support networks that extend beyond individual activities. Repeated interaction among group members strengthens interpersonal bonds, which in turn enhances learners' sense of belonging and commitment to continued participation. As trust and familiarity increase, learners become more comfortable navigating misunderstandings and negotiating meaning

collaboratively. These relational processes promote sustained engagement and contribute to gradual improvements in speaking fluency and confidence.

Overall, social dynamics in informal language learning environments are integral to effective speaking development. Balanced participation, empathetic facilitation, and culturally responsive practices create conditions in which learners feel safe to engage in spontaneous communication. By fostering trust-based relationships and collaborative interaction, informal settings enable adult foreign language learners to move beyond hesitation and toward more confident and fluent language use.

Cognitive Processing in Informal Speaking Activities

In informal speaking activities, cognitive processing differs markedly from that in structured instructional settings. Freed from rigid pedagogical frameworks, learners engage with language as an integrated and continuous process involving comprehension, planning, and production. This dynamic flow requires a high degree of cognitive flexibility. Informal contexts activate both higher-order and lower-order linguistic subsystems, engaging phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic processing simultaneously. Because informal interactions are unpredictable, learners must attend closely to external variability and adapt their linguistic output in real time.

Unlike classroom tasks, informal speaking activities typically do not allow learners the opportunity to pre-plan or rehearse utterances. As a result, learners rely heavily on real-time control strategies that enable them to adjust, edit, and reformulate speech while maintaining interaction. These strategies support the rapid retrieval and manipulation of linguistic resources, strengthening neural pathways associated with spontaneous language production. In peer-to-peer and volunteer-led informal settings, interlocutors often modify their speech to match learners' proficiency levels, providing tailored input that facilitates comprehension and interaction.

Such refinements align with the concept of modified input in second language acquisition research. "Foreigner talk" refers to speech that highlights salient lexical and syntactic features through simplification, repetition, or segmentation, thereby increasing comprehensibility and encouraging uptake. Modified input also supports working memory by reducing cognitive load. Given the limited capacity of working memory to process linguistic information at any given moment, segmentation and simplification allow learners to integrate new patterns before they fade from short-term memory storage.

Informal social interactions also generate frequent opportunities for feedback cycles, including clarification requests, confirmation checks, and recasts. These feedback mechanisms correspond to both explicit and implicit corrective strategies described in the interaction hypothesis (Tran-Hoang-Thu, 2009). Explicit feedback draws learners' conscious attention to errors but may temporarily disrupt conversational flow. In contrast, recasts embed corrective information within ongoing interaction, preserving communicative rhythm while subtly guiding learners toward more accurate forms. Each feedback type contributes differently to language development, with explicit feedback enhancing rule awareness and implicit feedback supporting fluency and continuity.

Cognitive and social processes are closely intertwined in group-based informal learning environments, particularly when participants possess varying proficiency levels. Within a sociocultural framework, such interactions reflect distributed processing, whereby more proficient speakers handle complex utterances while less proficient learners focus on word retrieval, pronunciation, and sentence construction. This tiered collaborative construction

reduces individual cognitive burden and enables learners to perform beyond their independent capacities. Informal interactions also require heightened attentional control, as learners must monitor turn-taking cues, intonation patterns, gestures, and environmental noise, especially in settings such as festivals or public events (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020).

The process of noticing plays a critical role in informal language learning. Noticing refers to learners' awareness of gaps between intended meaning and actual linguistic output (Tran-Hoang-Thu, 2009). Informal contexts increase opportunities for noticing because communicative breakdowns occur naturally and demand immediate resolution. Learners frequently self-correct or rephrase utterances in response to interlocutor feedback, engaging self-monitoring systems more rapidly than in classroom-based tasks. These immediate adjustments contribute to procedural consolidation, strengthening learners' ability to access and apply linguistic knowledge spontaneously.

Rich, multimodal contexts further enhance cognitive processing in informal speaking activities. Language use is often accompanied by visual, auditory, and sensory stimuli, which support deeper memory encoding. For example, during group cooking activities, verbal descriptions of ingredients and actions are reinforced by visual and olfactory cues, resulting in more durable memory traces (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Similarly, drama and music-based activities integrate movement, rhythm, and melody, engaging motor memory systems that aid recall under communicative pressure (Ginzburg & Daniela, 2024).

Informal speaking situations also stimulate active problem-solving processes. Learners negotiate meaning by paraphrasing, using gestures, or restructuring utterances when communication difficulties arise (Lee, 2015). These strategies engage executive functions such as task switching and inhibitory control, allowing learners to manage linguistic demands alongside interactional goals. Repeated participation in such activities strengthens cognitive-linguistic interfaces, improving learners' capacity to maintain fluency while adapting grammatical structures in real time.

Importantly, informal community-based dialogue is characterized by a lack of predictability, which necessitates rapid reorganization of linguistic resources without interrupting speech (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). This communicative flexibility enables learners to prioritize thematic relevance over syntactic perfection when resources are limited. Cognitive load management in these settings is closely linked to affective factors. Positive emotional states, supported by humor and empathy in volunteer-led meetups, reduce excessive self-monitoring and promote sustained attention to meaning rather than form (Norman & Eslami, 2024).

In sum, informal speaking activities create cognitively rich environments that support real-time language processing, adaptive control strategies, and procedural learning. Through modified input, interactive feedback, collaborative scaffolding, and multimodal engagement, these contexts enhance adult foreign language acquisition beyond what is typically achieved through formal instructional practices alone.

Affective Factors in Informal Language Learning

Affective factors in informal language learning environments play a central role in shaping learners' engagement, willingness to take communicative risks, and confidence in speaking. Emotional variables influence not only the quantity of learners' participation but also the quality of cognitive processing during interaction, as described in Section 4.1. Informal learning contexts can either facilitate or inhibit language development depending on how effectively they support learners' emotional needs.

Confidence is one of the most influential affective variables in informal speaking contexts. In volunteer-led discussion groups and community-based activities, learners frequently report increased confidence in their speaking abilities, even when their linguistic resources are limited (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020). Informal settings alter learners' perceptions of error-making; mistakes are viewed as a natural and expected part of communication rather than as indicators of deficiency. This reframing encourages learners to maintain their conversational flow and express ideas more freely without fear of negative evaluation.

Anxiety, by contrast, can significantly restrict learners' willingness to participate in spoken interaction. Even when learners possess adequate linguistic knowledge, heightened anxiety may suppress speech production. This relationship is effectively explained by Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which posits that emotional barriers such as fear and stress can block the intake and processing of linguistic input (Norman & Eslami, 2024). Informal activities that emphasize collaboration and shared goals help lower the affective filter by shifting attention away from performance and toward collective engagement. Tasks such as cooking together or participating in drama activities prioritize experiential involvement over linguistic accuracy, thereby reducing evaluative pressure (Zuo, 2024).

Social trust is a critical factor in sustaining productive affective conditions. The presence of empathetic partners—whether native speakers, volunteers, or more proficient peers—reduces perceived social risk and encourages experimentation with new vocabulary and grammatical structures (Woltran & Schwab, 2025). Trust is particularly important in multilingual groups where participants may alternate between languages; without balanced support, less proficient learners may feel marginalized if interaction norms favor advanced speakers (Lee, 2015). Effective facilitation ensures that linguistic support and participation opportunities are equitably distributed, maintaining a sense of fairness and inclusion.

Motivation in informal learning contexts is strongly influenced by the personal relevance of activities. Adults are more engaged when tasks reflect their interests, cultural backgrounds, or immediate communicative needs (Reeve, 2022). Informal settings naturally allow topics to emerge from participants' lived experiences, such as discussing local events during coffee meetings or navigating neighborhood routes together. Emotional investment in these topics enhances persistence and supports deeper semantic processing, contributing to improved retention and fluency.

Facilitators play a crucial role in regulating affective dynamics. Empathetic volunteer leaders who prioritize encouragement over excessive correction help maintain morale and guide learners through recasts or modeled alternatives rather than overt criticism (Tran-Hoang-Thu, 2009). Framing errors as developmental opportunities rather than failures reinforces learners' confidence and supports a collaborative problem-solving orientation. Over time, participants learn to interpret feedback positively within a supportive group environment.

Long-term participation in informal language groups strengthens interpersonal bonds, which further reduces anxiety and increases communicative ease. Familiarity with interlocutors enables learners to anticipate speech patterns and interactional cues, resulting in smoother turn-taking and expanded expressive range (Woltran & Schwab, 2025). Shared successes, such as effectively narrating personal experiences or completing collaborative tasks, reinforce motivation and collective confidence.

Digital extensions of informal learning communities offer additional affective benefits. Asynchronous communication platforms allow learners with high speaking anxiety to engage gradually, beginning with brief written contributions and progressing toward voice

messages or live interaction (Reeve, 2022). This stepwise progression accommodates varying levels of emotional readiness while maintaining consistent exposure to the target language. Humor also plays a valuable role in informal learning environments; laughter and playful interaction reduce tension, reframe errors, and promote stylistic flexibility, including the use of colloquial language (Norman & Eslami, 2024).

Cultural sensitivity is essential in managing affective dynamics within diverse learner groups. Differences in norms related to turn-taking, feedback timing, and formality may influence learners' comfort levels (Woltran & Schwab, 2025). Activities designed with flexibility—such as pair work for more reserved learners and open group discussions for more confident participants—help accommodate these differences and promote equitable participation.

Overall, affective factors are deeply intertwined with cognitive processing in informal language learning. Psychological comfort, appropriate challenge, humor, trust, and empathetic scaffolding create conditions that enable learners to focus on meaning rather than excessive self-monitoring. When emotional and cognitive elements are aligned, informal learning environments support sustained engagement and facilitate the development of communicative competence and fluency in real-world contexts (Gooch & Stevenson, 2020; Lee, 2015).

Conclusion

Adult foreign language learners face a range of challenges in developing speaking skills, arising from both linguistic and psychological factors. While formal instructional settings provide essential foundations in grammar, pronunciation, and controlled practice, they often fall short in offering the spontaneity and authentic, multilayered interaction necessary for the development of communicative competence. As a result, learners may struggle to transfer classroom-based knowledge to real-world speaking situations.

This study highlights the complementary role of informal learning environments—such as community conversation groups, volunteer-led activities, and digital social platforms—in supporting adult learners' speaking development. These contexts create opportunities for relaxed, meaningful interaction that reduces anxiety and encourages sustained participation. Through authentic communication, learners engage in real-time language processing, develop strategic competence, and enhance socio-emotional engagement, all of which contribute to improved fluency and confidence.

By integrating formal instruction with socially embedded informal learning activities, a more comprehensive approach to speaking development emerges. Formal contexts provide structure and systematic guidance, while informal environments foster adaptability, risk-taking, and emotional comfort. The interaction between these domains enables adult learners to practice language in ways that are both pedagogically grounded and personally relevant, supporting long-term engagement and communicative growth.

Ultimately, effective adult foreign language education requires recognizing the interdependence of cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning. Instructional models that intentionally incorporate informal, real-world communicative opportunities alongside formal teaching are better positioned to address the complex needs of adult learners. Such integrative approaches can enhance speaking proficiency, promote learner autonomy, and facilitate confident communication in diverse real-life contexts.

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