

Summary – The story in short

On Wednesday 29 February 2012 I visited the well-established German Language café which meets weekly in a café in the centre of Southampton and which was set up as part of the Language Café project (www.languagecafe.eu)

Aims/Objectives - Why, Where?

As one of the partners in the Metikos project, LLAS was asked to carry out desk research into the models of language cafés across Europe. We wanted to identify examples of good practice, barriers to success, different organizational models which would help those people in the project who were going to organize language cafes. We felt that the best way to experience the ‘flavour’ of language cafes was to visit one and have a taste of the language café experience.

The Project - How, Who, When?

I liaised with the German café facilitator and asked if she would be happy for me to join them on one occasion. The café is open to all and was advertised on the Language café website but I wanted to alert them to my visit as I wanted the opportunity to chat with participants about their impressions of the language café. One of my colleagues visited the French café in Southampton, another the Italian café so we were able to compare notes and found that our experiences were very similar. I should also say that there were about four people who were regulars at all three cafes! My impressions of the café were recorded in the research report and are included in this case study

below.

Results/Evaluation

All those attending the German café said that they came to maintain a language for social and travel purposes. Many of the participants had lived in Germany for 1-5 years and wanted to refresh/maintain their language skills. The group members were of varying ability in the language but the pace of the session was led by the more confident speakers, the less able being content to learn by listening. I really felt that this worked and everybody was happy with it.

There was no structure to the session, the focus being on conversation centering around, for example, experiences in German speaking countries and differences in the education system. Participants did not feel the need for the session to be more heavily facilitated.

The German café did not have regular participation from a native speaker. Some participants felt that it would be beneficial to have a native speaker present to help correct errors and provide vocabulary as well as providing a more 'authentic' conversational experience. However, they did not express a desire to have a group led or facilitated by a native speaker and they were not prepared to pay for a native speaker to join them.

It seems as though most of the participants at the cafes had joined the café when it started or had heard about it from other participants. The venue is a café where the owner is interested in languages, particularly Italian and is happy to support the venue providing a free venue in return for a cup of coffee.

All the participants feel it is their responsibility for creating a convivial atmosphere and welcoming new members. The size of the group was such that it was possible to sit round one table and chat as a whole group though there were conversation

s in sub groups during the session. They feel that the friendly environment helps create confidence to participate fully in the café session. Start and finish times were approximate. Many stayed beyond the publicised end time and continued chatting.

The café meets weekly throughout the year; participants felt that weekly rather than fortnightly/monthly meetings were important to maintain momentum.

Sustainability

The model of this style of language café is eminently sustainable. There are no financial costs attached: Venues are offered free of charge to the cafes though in all cases participants are expected to buy a drink. The fact that there is no charge to attend seemed important to participants of the German café: they said that they were not willing to pay for a native speaker to attend, for example. The sustainability of the café does rely on a person willing to be a key contact for enquirers and the café owner but this is not onerous. Provided that all participants come to the café with shared expectations and shared aims, there is no reason to think that the café will cease to run.

Lessons Learnt

We learned that there is a reasonable level of demand for informal language learning for those people who want to maintain language for holiday/social purposes. We also reflected on what issues needed to be considered when transferring the model to informal language learning for immigrants. The following points were noted:

- Getting the right location for the café will be crucial
- 10 participants is an optimal number
- The expectations of participants needs to be managed
- Finding the right avenues for publicizing the café will be important
- The role of a native speaker and facilitator will be more important in these cafes than in the traditional café
- Training for facilitators would be beneficial
- Getting support from stakeholder organisations would be beneficial

International links

www.languagecafe.eu points to a number of cafes operating across Europe though in a number of countries who were partners in the Language Cafes project, the cafes no longer run.