

NÄKÖKULMA

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EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS AND TWO-WAY INTEGRATION: THE IMPACT OF SHARED TOGETHERNESS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Everyday encounters in informal settings fill an important function by creating opportunities to practice a language and to form connections with others. At the Coffee Club at Villa Victor in Oulu and the Cirkeln program by Luckan, language learning happens alongside doing things together, simultaneously enabling a sense of community to be formed.

"If we create places of joy [...] where everyone can go, children, adults, everyone. So then if these places would exist, then you might meet more people, different people. Because, here, when the winter begins, no one walks outside, but if these places would exist, then people might like to go there, and for example drink tea and coffee or something" (Sara)

The Mobile Futures research project studies diversity, trust, and two-way integration, focusing on different themes, such as everyday encounters. During the course of our research, participants have repeatedly demonstrated the lack of everyday spaces to meet new people, as is illustrated in the quote above from Sara (pseudonym). It is useful to think about all the things that happen when people come together. Whether it is a casual chat over coffee, or an organised activity at an event, encounters create platforms for far more than conversation and joint activities. They shape our understanding, nurture connections, and often lead to unexpected opportunities. Doing things together fosters safe spaces for learning.

The by-products of encounters go beyond the immediate exchange of words. They include the feeling of inclusion, a sense of community, and the empowerment that comes from being part

of something bigger. But encounters also embed practical aspects, such as the opportunity to use a language that one is currently learning.

Challenges and opportunities

Moving to a new country often presents the challenge of learning a new language. For migrants, especially adults, finding opportunities to practice the local languages can be difficult due to a lack of established connections and possibilities for everyday encounters. The widespread use of English as a lingua franca can further complicate this process. Speaking one of the local languages opens up cultural nuances and a possibility to create connections in a new environment, but connections also provide a space for everyday use of local languages.

Formal language courses, such as the integration training offered for unemployed migrants who have been in Finland for less than three years, provide a structured learning environment. However, they often focus on language as a means to an end - securing a job or ensuring successful integration. The integration training, typically completed in 1-2 years, is beneficial but not accessible to all. In addition, the courses tend to emphasize grammar and structure over communication, and opportunities to continue using the language after the training is over are scarce.

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Language learning extends beyond formal integration training and practicality. Everyday interactions and the use of language in informal settings, can create spaces of inclusivity and make the target language a part of everyday life. This two-way integration process of encounters and all that comes with it, involves not just the migrant population, but the entire society.

However, finding spaces for informal encounters can be challenging. Therefore, as we see it, it is the responsibility of the receiving society to create more opportunities for these spaces to occur, and thus promote two-way integration.

Examples of shared togetherness

There are many great examples for facilitating such encounters while creating opportunities for shared togetherness. Close collaborations with local actors have been, and are, a large part of the ongoing research in the Mobile Futures project. A key project collaborator is the Multicultural centre Villa Victor from the City of Oulu. Villa Victor organises events, provides guidance in multiple languages, as well as free of charge language courses.

As part of the collaboration, the Mobile Futures research team "Trust in everyday encounters" collected feedback about the services offered by Villa Victor. Overall, the feedback was very positive.

However, many people were hoping for more opportunities to speak Finnish in an informal setting, for example, over a cup of coffee. A couple of months later, as a response to the feedback the Villa Victor Coffee Club was initiated. The main idea behind the Coffee Club is to get together, have tea and coffee and speak in Finnish. No prior language skills are required, only a willingness to meet new people. For each meeting, there is a topic for discussion or a joint activity that we do together. It can, for example, be a discussion on literature or doing aquarelle painting. The content and topics are suggested by the participants. There is no required sign-up and people can come and go according to their needs. The Coffee Club is perceived as something very positive, and is appreciated by the participants, who refer to the Coffee Club as a safe place to meet new people. Strikingly, many also say that the Coffee Club is the only place where they actually communicate in Finnish.

Another example of fostering shared togetherness is the Cirkeln program by Luckan Integration. Cirkeln (Eng. 'the circle') is designed to encourage two-way integration. It provides a platform where people can meet and engage through different activities. The main idea behind the program is that meeting new people might feel less intimidating when the objective of the meeting is something else than the encounter itself. Furthermore, Cirkeln also creates an opportunity for using a local or any other language, in a comfortable setting. "Circles" are created on the basis of language, location or shared interests, depending on the participants' wishes. The choice of activity is entirely up to the group, fostering a sense of ownership and community. By creating a warm and welcoming community, Cirkeln not only facilitates language learning but also promotes a sense of belonging and contributes to the process of two-way integration.

In conclusion, initiatives like the Villa Victor Coffee Club and Cirkeln are great examples of how two-way integration can be facilitated in practice. They create spaces for shared togetherness, promote language learning in informal settings, and most importantly, make people feel included and part of something bigger. These initiatives highlight the importance of everyday encounters and shared activities; they serve as a reminder that integration should be a two-way process, involving both the migrant population and the receiving society. In these settings, language learning becomes a by-product of shared experiences and encounters, rather than a separate, isolated task of the individual.

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