

THE ROLE OF AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: ROAD TRIPS AS A WAY TO GRASP THE SOUL OF A TARGET LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of authentic experiences in enhancing foreign language learning, given that they immerse language learners in real-life situations, leading to deeper comprehension and retention of linguistic elements. Based upon the already widely debated criticism of language learning approaches, which argues against the extensive focus on form (*know what*) to the detriment of meaning (*know how*), the study analyses the progress made by students learning the Romanian language following participation in road trips. During such non-formal activities, learners get to engage with native speakers in spontaneous conversations, encountering colloquialisms and regional dialects that enrich their language repertoire. Furthermore, the journey itself becomes a catalyst for cultural exploration, as learners navigate diverse landscapes, interact with local communities, and partake in cultural events. This firsthand exposure deepens learners' cultural understanding, sensitizing them to the nuances of language use within its socio-cultural context. Such interactions provide invaluable opportunities for learners to refine their listening and speaking skills in authentic contexts, thereby bridging the gap between classroom instruction and real-world application. The students' immersion in authentic Romanian settings was evaluated through a blend of qualitative and quantitative analysis methodologies, which included the examination of teachers' observation sheets, as well as conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants. The research focused on the application of language theory in real-life situations, the development of listening and speaking skills, cooperative problem-solving, refinement of soft skills, increase of student self-confidence and motivation, and enhancement of cultural awareness. The study's findings indicate that practicing foreign languages in unconventional settings and through authentic interactions, with genuine communicative goals in mind, generates a significant improvement in communicative skills. This suggests that integrating road trips into language learning curricula holds significant potential for cultivating linguistic proficiency, cultural competence, and a passion for language acquisition.

Keywords: *Foreign language learning, non-formal education, listening and speaking skills, pragmatic skills, intercultural awareness.*

1. Introduction

The dominance of form-focused language teaching methods often results in learners acquiring extensive theoretical knowledge without practical skills, an imbalance that leads to learners struggling to apply theoretical understanding in real contexts. Critics argue that form-focused language teaching impedes natural language input essential for acquisition, lacking opportunities for learners to activate their language knowledge (Harmer, 2007). Consequently, learners proficient in grammar rules may falter in real communicative situations. To address these deficiencies, meaning-focused methods like Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have been advocated (Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). Ellis (2009) emphasizes TBLT's focus on problem-solving and real-life relevance, contrasting it with mere exercises. Constructivist learning environments also endorse task-based approaches, aligning with Herrington et al.'s (2003) notion of authentic activities. Such methods bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-life applications, facilitating purposeful language use (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010). Road trips serve as invaluable conduits for cultural immersion in language acquisition. Learners are exposed to colloquial expressions, regional dialects, and cultural practices, fostering an intuitive grasp of language usage (Brown, 2007). These experiences function as linguistic laboratories, allowing learners to experiment with the target language across diverse communicative scenarios (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Whether conversing with locals, deciphering road signs, or navigating unfamiliar territories, learners engage in real-time language production and comprehension (Ellis, 2008). Such interactive engagement promotes linguistic autonomy and confidence, enabling learners to participate in authentic communicative exchanges with ease (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

2. Data collection

This study was centered on a group of 20 students from varied cultural backgrounds (Ukrainians and Arabs), aged 17 – 23, who were enrolled in the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens program. The research encompassed two authentic experiences: the first trip was conducted in late autumn, at the A1 – A2 proficiency level, whereas the second took place 7 months into the program, late spring, at the A2 – B1 proficiency level. These excursions were meticulously organized to complement traditional classroom instruction, facilitated by institutional support, and structured to incorporate task-based language teaching, team-building activities, and didactic games. Furthermore, a sociocultural dimension was integrated into the excursions, consisting of visits to museums, picturesque locales, and guided nature walks. The students' immersive encounters were assessed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, which involved teacher observation sheets and semi-structured interviews with the participants. The parameters surveyed referred to language proficiency, cultural awareness, student motivation, and student anxiety. The questions of the semi-structured interview were crafted to ascertain the perceived value of the authentic experiences encountered, while also leaving room for interpretation and expression of personal evaluation and feelings. They required instances of specific communicative contexts, idiomatic expressions, and language usage that they could either learn for the first time or enhance their mastery of. Additionally, these interviews incorporated a quantitative component, thus seeking to measure the degree to which students attained their communicative objectives in task-based activities and spontaneous interactions with peers or native speakers. The teacher observation sheets provided a perspective from the educator's viewpoint, offering insights into students' performance and conduct before, during, and after the excursions. These observations facilitated the assessment of progress by comparing students' behavior and achievements across different contexts. To ensure consistency and reliability, the observation sheets were structured to evaluate identical parameters across both excursions, employing a combination of rating systems and descriptive accounts to capture the nuances of the experience. The teacher's evaluation of language proficiency, supported by the students' perspectives, faced the challenge of quantifying the distinct advantages of immersive activities and differentiating them from the progress achieved in the classroom.

3. Results

The comparative analysis of the data collected following the two road trips from both students and the teacher revealed findings that confirm the assumptions of the study and previous research: language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and motivation increased at various paces, while anxiety levels lowered. This also sheds light on the dynamic relationship between motivation and anxiety, confirmed by previous studies (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Teimouri et al., 2019).

Following the autumn trip, students predominantly cited their key accomplishments in terms of proficiency as gaining new vocabulary, successfully navigating real-life situations (such as ordering food, asking for directions, and seeking clarification), and enhancing their listening skills. They also recognized the challenge of understanding informal, rapid conversations with native speakers and the complexities of Romanian pronunciation variations. As the students' proficiency levels advanced, their evaluation of the second trip focused on more complex areas: engaging in negotiations with locals, carrying casual conversations with new Romanian acquaintances, and participating in lighthearted banter and humor. This viewpoint was supported by the teacher's assessment, as she observed the learners' gradual improvement in practical language skills and noted that the spring trip was associated with twice as many social interactions with locals, according to her observations. If, during the first immersive experience, students avoided spontaneously engaging with the locals, the spring trip materialized in many communicative exchanges initiated by the learners. Furthermore, the teacher highlighted that the two trips resulted in enhanced rapport, social connections, and collaborative work among the participants, as they developed inside jokes, and broadened their interactions beyond their native language group.

Furthermore, the quantitative processing of the anxiety and motivation questions revealed that the first trip was associated with a higher level of anxiety related to the use of the Romanian language in interactions with natives. When asked to rate their anxiety on a rate from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest level) 75 % of the students reported levels of nervousness of 4 and 5, whereas the second excursion was

predominantly associated, according to the answers, with levels of 2 and 3 (80%). Notably, 3 students have given a rating of 1 when undertaking the second questionnaire, registering a considerable reduction in comparison to their first experience (where they considered that their communicative stress reached level 4). Participants admitted to experiencing nervousness when using the target language in unfamiliar settings and described fear of making mistakes or generating misunderstandings. Some learners also listed some solutions to cope with such setbacks: focusing on communication rather than being accurate about grammar, seeking support from their colleagues, or supplementing verbal engagement with nonverbal and paraverbal cues.

In terms of student motivation, the comparative analysis highlights less steep curves and an expected indirectly proportional connection with anxiety: the autumn trip was associated with an average motivation level of 2 and 3 (65 %), while the second generated a boost towards the high end, thus showing the fruits of the previous immersive experiences (80% - motivation rate of 4 and 5). The main sources of motivation named by the respondents to the semi-structured interview stemmed from the excitement of real-life application of language skills, which they considered to be far more engaging than traditional classroom activities.

Finally, interviewees also provided examples of cultural insights or experiences gained during the two field trips. They mentioned their appreciation for the Romanian hospitality and kindness, the surprise that Romanians unanimously showed undisguised enthusiasm at seeing foreigners learning their language and provided eager linguistic support without seeming deterred by flaws in discourse. Moreover, respondents pointed out the realisation that Romania has a rich and fascinating history, set against the background of breathtaking natural landscapes. All participants expressed the excitement to be presented with Romanian customs and traditions while visiting the cultural landmarks and the local households. The respondents acknowledged that these experiences have deepened their understanding and appreciation of the target culture, leading to greater cultural sensitivity and empathy.

4. Conclusions

The study shows that road trips serve as an effective supplementary tool for enhancing foreign language acquisition among learners at varying proficiency levels. The quantitative and qualitative data collected from both students and teachers corroborate the hypothesis that such immersive experiences significantly enhance language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and student motivation, while concurrently reducing anxiety. Specifically, the findings reveal that students exhibited marked improvements in practical language use, evidenced by their ability to engage in complex communicative tasks and navigate social interactions with native speakers. The increased proficiency in pragmalinguistic skills and the ability to handle colloquial and fast-paced dialogues point to the considerable benefits of real-world language practice. Additionally, the development of social bonds and teamwork among students from diverse cultural backgrounds proves the positive impact of collaborative learning environments fostered during these trips.

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