

## Investigating the Effects of Authentic Activities on Foreign Language Learning: A Design-based Research Approach

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### ABSTRACT

Achieving communicative competency in English classes has been a key goal in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). During this process, however, integrating the difficulty and complexity of real life tasks into classroom teaching has often been disregarded. Lack of opportunities for authentic language use often results in learners' gaining extensive knowledge about the target language (*know what*) while they are weak in using the language in a meaningful way (*know how*). Accordingly, while learners can talk about grammar rules, they usually fail to use these rules for real communicative purposes in unstructured genuine settings. The present study employed a design-based research approach to investigate the use of authentic activities in EFL classes. For this purpose, an e-learning environment was created based on initial design principles of authentic activities and implemented in three pre-university level EFL classes in North Cyprus in two research cycles. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, work samples, and observations. In accordance with the findings and continuous literature review, 11 design principles were derived from the initial design principles for the EFL context in order to facilitate competency-based foreign language use.

### Keywords

Authentic learning, Authentic tasks, Foreign language education, Task-based language learning, Design-based research

### Introduction

The inquiry voiced by Allwright (1979) as “Are we teaching language (for communication)?” or “Are we teaching communication (via language)?” (p. 167) addresses the issues related to communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, where learners may have minimal opportunities to authentic use of the target language. When this is coupled with form-focused language teaching methods (as opposed to meaning-focused ones) in class, education often results in learners gaining extensive knowledge about the target language by being equipped with *know what* (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) yet having minimal or no chance to gain *know how* skills (Bowles, 2011; Rebuschat & Williams, 2012; Stalnaker, 2012), a problem referred to as “inert knowledge” (Whitehead, 1929). Harmer (2007) emphasises the inadequate structure of form-focused language teaching methods and argues that this type of approach “stops students from getting the kind of natural input that will help them acquire language because it fails to give them opportunities to activate their language knowledge” (p. 49). In such cases learners can talk about grammar rules, while they usually fail to use their knowledge for real communicative purposes.

As a remedy for the deficiencies caused by the form-focused language teaching methods, meaning-focused methods, specifically task-based language teaching (TBLT), have been proposed to give learners communicative competency so that they use the target language for communication (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). Ellis (2009), as a reaction to those who see TBLT simply as an exercise to do rather than a task to complete, points out that in TBLT learners address real problems and relate what they learn to everyday life. Likewise, constructivist learning environments support question-based, issue-based, case-based, project-based, problem-based or task-based learning, all of which differ in depth of complexity but are built on “... the same assumption about active, constructive, and authentic learning” (Jonassen, 1999, p. 219). Any task aimed at giving learners usable knowledge should parallel the real world as closely as possible, and the tasks that have real world relevance are “authentic activities” (Herrington et al., 2003). Authentic learning, according to Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver (2010), can situate learning tasks in contexts that close the gap between classrooms and real life. Based on this conception, this paper reports a study that provided learners with opportunities to use the target language in purposeful and complex ways through authentic activities.

## Literature review

In order to inform the investigation, a literature review was undertaken across relevant areas of study including the “assistance dilemma” and authentic learning, as discussed below.

### Assistance dilemma

Controversy about how instructional guidance in education should be provided has engaged many educational researchers (e.g., Hwang & Wang, 2016). While some researchers argue that explicit and direct instruction is the optimum method of education (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006; Rosenshine, 2009), others argue that learners should be given opportunities to construct knowledge themselves under the guidance of more capable persons (Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, & Tenenbaum, 2011; Lee & Anderson, 2013). This controversy has been referred to as the “assistance dilemma” by Koedinger and Aleven (2007). The following section will give information about direct instructional guidance and its drawbacks, and constructivist teaching methods.

#### *Direct instructional guidance in language learning*

According to this method, there is one correct answer to the problem and both the answer and the path are known by the teacher who is assumed to provide systematic detailed instructions to learners to achieve the outcome and the learning objectives (Kirschner et al., 2006). Supporters of this “traditional” method (Nunan, 2004) argue that syllabuses should be designed to teach from simple to complex structures “in building-block fashion” (Long, 1991, p. 41). This type of teaching employs “focus-on-forms” (Long, 1991) (or form-focused activities) aiming at teaching any one aspect of linguistic form at a time (“form of the day”) through explicit instruction (Ellis, 2012) in the hope that the language learner will, with practice, use the form correctly and appropriately in genuine settings.

Yet, such approaches were found limited in bringing the learner to the desired competence level to communicate effectively in the language (Ellis, 1997; Lightbown, 1985). Nunan’s (1995) research, for example, concluded that instruction on its own does not lead to acquisition and “the gap between teaching and learning will be narrowed when learners are given a more active role in three key domains of content, process, and language” (p. 154). Consequently, learning activities should be designed to be learner-centred, meaning-focused and communicative with real world relevance, as discussed below.

#### *Constructivist teaching methods in language learning*

Educators with more constructivist views advocate that “knowledge is not a *thing* that can be simply transmitted from one person to another” (Chee, 1995, p. 135). Johnston and Goettsch (2000), in the same vein, mention the difference between understanding (*knowing what*) and production (*knowing how*) in language education, as articulated by one of their study participants:

They oftentimes don’t understand the rules. They just read a rule and go, “OK, I’ve read this since I was eleven years old. I have read it a million times back in my country and here.” And they’re still not using it right. They all know they need to use the third person singular “s” but half the class still doesn’t use it. They use it in the grammar exercises, but they don’t apply it while they are speaking or writing. (p. 456)

Unlike form-focused approaches – e.g., Grammar Translation Method or Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), meaning-focused approaches with task-based, problem-based, and project-based activities shift the focus from the “forms” to “task completion” in which meaning is primary (Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). Linguistic elements (“form”) are still important and brought to learners’ attention as they arise incidentally in lessons and as a part of communicative language practice (“focus-on-form,” Doughty & Williams, 1998). In this research, form-focused instructional guidance is considered as direct teaching method whereas meaning-focused approaches are considered as minimally guided constructivist approaches. Table 1 summarises form-focused and meaning-focused methods of instruction in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

Meaning-focused method is also recommended by Council of Europe (2001) when designing a curriculum. Tasks rather than linguistic structures should be the core units that describe the selection of goals. In other words, the objectives of the lessons should not be describing what specific language features students gain, like in the example: “The students will learn how to use the past continuous and past simple tenses to express an

interrupted action” (Ritchie, 2003, p. 114). Instead, the objectives should focus on using the language for an authentic purpose to be able to function in society, as is described in The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001): “[Learner] can describe plans and arrangements, habits and routines, past activities and personal experiences.” In short, as Van den Branden (2006) suggests, “there should be a close link between the tasks performed by learners in the language classroom and in the outside world” (p. 6), which is authentic learning. To put it differently, meaning-focused method and authentic learning overlap in terms of relevance, meaning, purpose and type of the instruction.

Table 1. Instructional models of linguistic forms in TESOL

Form-focused methods	Meaning-focused methods
<i>Proactive:</i> The form of the day is planned by the teacher to ensure that form is learned or practiced. If the form is not learned or practiced, the learning activity is not considered successful.	<i>Reactive or corrective feedback:</i> Possible forms may or may not have been determined prior to the activity. Learners’ errors that arise while completing the activity define what forms will be focused on to be able to complete the activity.
<i>Planned:</i> The form of the day is determined prior to the activity; however, learners are not explicitly made aware that a specific form is being studied and thus they act as language users rather than language learners.	<i>Incidental:</i> Forms are not determined prior to the activity. They arise as learners complete the activity. Thus, instead of recycling a single form several times, a variety of forms are addressed based on the demands of the learners to be able to complete the activity.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how meaning-focused methods help the learners in class, a number of researchers (Granena, 2016; Namazian Dost, Bohloulzadeh & Pazhakh, 2017; Nazari & Tabatabaei, 2016) compared traditional teaching with meaning-focused ones, more specifically TBLT, concluding that minimal guided methods (i.e., meaning-focused ones) outperformed guided (i.e., traditional) methods. Yet, these studies can be critiqued as the tasks they employed were mostly school type of tasks such as “spot-the-difference,” “find a suitable title for the original text” (Granena, 2016) or “sequence pictures” (Nazari & Tabatabaei, 2016), rather than real-world tasks. Although some studies (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Mishan & Strunz, 2003; Nazari & Tabatabaei, 2016) provided guiding principles to design TBLT, elements to assist designing real-world relevant tasks were missing. This study, then, seeks to provide guiding principles for teachers to design tasks which go beyond exercises in order to close the gap between the classroom and the real world by investigating the effects of authentic activities on foreign language learning. The next section will describe authentic learning and the characteristics of authentic activities.

### Authentic learning

Authentic learning is an instructional approach that provides learners with opportunities to develop knowledge “embedded in the social and physical context within which it will be used” (Herrington et al., 2010, p. 15). Learners are given situations based on a major relevant real-world task which requires them to investigate a problem in depth in collaboration with peers and suggest their solution in the form of a product to be shared with a wider audience. In this respect, Herrington et al. (2003) describe authentic activities as those that:

- have real world relevance
- are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity
- comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time
- provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources
- provide opportunity to collaborate
- provide the opportunity to reflect
- can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain specific outcomes
- are seamlessly integrated with assessment
- yield polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else
- allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome.

The learning activity designed in the present study was initially guided by these ten characteristics, aiming to enable learners to gain robust knowledge that they can transfer to real-life. With this aim, the study investigated the following research question: In what ways do students achieve foreign language competency through the use of authentic activities? The following section describes the methodology used to guide this research.

## Method

A design-based research (DBR) study was conducted, comprising four phases (Reeves, 2006) in two full iterative cycles of enquiry, each cycle lasting six weeks (Figure 1).

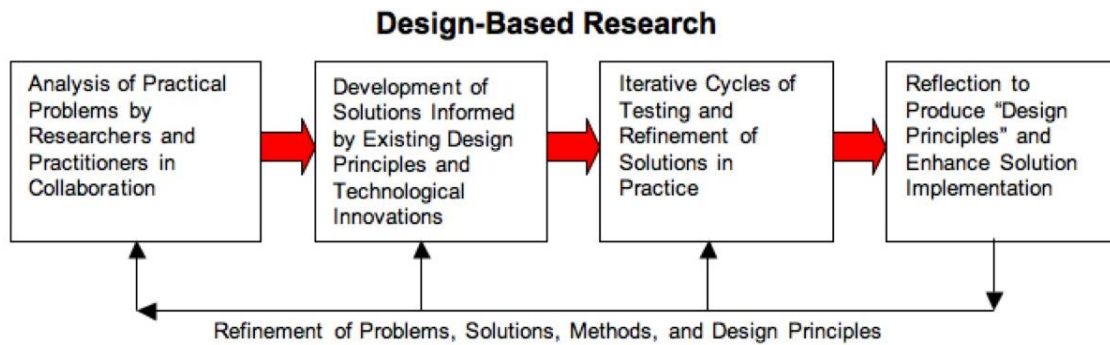


Figure 1. Four phases of design-based research (Reeves, 2006, p. 59)

The first phase of both cycles investigated the problem by consulting practitioners, using personal experiences, conducting a literature review and analysing reports on the causes and effects of the problem in practice. In the second phase, the learning environment was developed (as described below) based on the initial principles. This phase was followed by the first implementation –the third phase of DBR. It was a testing and refinement process so that the researchers fine-tuned the research by making changes to the learning environment, editing the design principles, and implementing the cycle again. For the refinement of the principles, coding was used as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). During the fourth phase, researchers reflected on their analysis of data, and shared their experiences and the outcome of their research in the form of 11 refined design principles (Ozverir et al., 2016) that can guide future educational practice. In this way, the findings contribute to both theory and practice.

Data was collected through documentary evidence from six students and two teachers from two different classes (three students from each class) during the first cycle, and from four students and one teacher during the second cycle. The participants were students studying English at the Preparatory School of an English-medium university in North Cyprus in order to follow their chosen subjects. The participants were heading towards B1–Threshold–level language competency (Council of Europe, 2001) and all the learning activities were designed to help learners achieve at this level. The activities were assessed based on the CEFR descriptors and *Verification of learning* approach (North, 2007). Three teacher participants were experienced staff members in the School.

## The learning environment

The study was administered over a full semester. The learning activity was based on a scenario where the class was the editorial board of the City Newsletter, the teacher was the Editor and the learners were journalists. For the major task, learners were required to conduct research, individually or in pairs, to collect data on a problem that had a social significance, and write an article on it to be published in the newsletter, and present it orally. Students were given a list of problem topics or could choose their own and had to propose a possible solution. Subtasks such as producing posters and videos, were intended to inform the audience further. Students were also required to complete such scaffolding learning activities as analysing the structure of an article (see Figure 2 below) and giving effective presentations where they were expected to reflect on both their learning and the process.

Moodle (see <https://moodle.org/>) was used as the platform which enabled students to participate in asynchronous chats and access learning resources by providing file sharing functionality (Figure 3).

Assessment was based on the *can do* statements of CEFR. A link was provided to inform students of the assessment breakdown showing the different components and how they contribute to the total grade, making it transparent for learners.

The task cycle was predominantly concerned with meaning. Learners were encouraged to reflect their opinions and solutions throughout the task. However, at different stages in the task cycle the focus was also on language and how it functions in context (as it is recommended in characteristic 10 below). This was in parallel with

Willis and Willis's (2007) claim that: "a focus on language occurs naturally when learners pause in their attempts to process language for meaning and switch to thinking about the language itself" (p. 113), enabling learners to develop their language skills independently of the teacher as they took their own initiative and produced "a far wider repertoire of language to express themselves" (p. 113). In the following section, findings related to learners' written interaction (during online discussions) and production (i.e., the article they wrote) as well as their spoken production (presentation and artefact) are described in detail.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Internet

<p><a href="#">Introduction</a> Nowadays, internet has an important part in our lives. Everyone is using the internet to get information about different topics as the internet has a lot of useful sources.</p> <p><b>Internet offers us a lot of valuable resources.</b> Firstly, we can visit a lot of websites and get information. For example, students can search for information in order to do their homework. Secondly, businessman can communicate with their clients, advertise their products, sell their products online. For example, you can get information about the latest mobile phone through the internet. Thirdly, everyone can use Internet for communication purposes. For instance, we can communicate with our loved ones when we are far away from them.</p> <p><a href="#">Body</a> <b>Apart from the advantages, there are several dangers of using Internet.</b> Firstly, there are some bad people out there. Therefore, we must be very careful when we chat online and we should not trust what people we really don't know. We shouldn't give our personal details , our address, our phone number to those we do not know well because they can steal our identity and do bad things. Secondly, we should not give our credit card details when we write emails. Also, we need to shop on safe sites such as Amazon, hepsiburada.com, or ebay and use our credit card details only on these safe sites in order to prevent online robbery and theft. Finally, some students are obsessed with Internet use and they spend hours and hours on the net instead of studying. As a result, they fail their exams. For instance, last year my friend was using the internet a lot and he only studied a little. At the end of the year, he failed his university exams.</p> <p><a href="#">Conclusion</a> In conclusion, using Internet is a great opportunity for all of us to improve ourselves while doing research as well as to communicate with each other. However, we need to be careful when we are online which is important for our safety. I strongly believe that Internet might not be as harmful as we might think of if we are careful and protect ourselves online.</p>	<p><a href="#">General Statement</a></p> <p><a href="#">Essay Outline</a></p> <p><a href="#">Thesis Statement</a></p> <p><a href="#">Supporting ideas</a></p> <p><a href="#">Sequencing Linkers</a></p> <p><a href="#">Examples</a></p> <p><a href="#">Example Linkers</a></p> <p><a href="#">Summary of ideas</a></p> <p><a href="#">Your View</a></p>
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Figure 2. A screenshot of one of the learning resources on analysing the structure of an article



Figure 3. A screenshot of the homepage of the learning environment

## Results

### Written interaction (online discussions)

Learners contributed to teacher-initiated online discussions. Their writing was evaluated in terms of relevance of content, stating a clear opinion, and contribution to the development of ideas. In this respect, the assessment process was guided by the descriptors given below:

#### *Understanding and responding appropriately to the topic*

Learners were expected to show competency by taking part in a number of online discussion forums. The aim was to provide learners with as many opportunities as possible to use the target language for meaningful communication and scaffold their learning process. When posts were analysed, it was observed that learners generally responded to questions appropriately, showing a clear understanding of what was asked. For example, when asked to examine the elements of an essay, they indicated the important elements according to the paragraphs, as one student responded:

I think the introduction paragraph must give general information about the article, not detail (A post by Seyit) (N.B. All names are pseudonyms and quotes given are verbatim).

#### *Expressing ideas and supporting them with examples*

Online discussions provided opportunities for learners to use a variety of language structures. Learners used different structures to complete the subtasks. Some learners preferred to mention their opinion directly by writing “in my opinion...” or “I think... .” Others preferred to provide their opinion implicitly, for example, by using a superlative:

Examples, example linkers, sequencing linkers, and cause/effect linkers have to be used in the body paragraph. Linkers are the most important thing because the meaning of the paragraph can be followed easily. (Emre)

Generally, learners provided examples to support their opinions by referring to the places or information they were writing about.

#### *Contribution for deeper understanding of discussions*

Learners contributed to discussions for deeper understanding of issues relevant to their topics or, in some cases, for deeper understanding of the task requirement. Learners accomplished this by responding to the teacher-initiated discussions with initial comments and then responding to the teacher’s further comments. This was beneficial to learners because the teachers’ feedback guided them in focusing or re-focusing their attention. An example of this took place between Caner (the participant teacher) and his student Mert, on using a source. The guiding questions were: (i) *What is a source?* (ii) *What is the role of a source?* (iii) *Do you think that a source is useful?*

Mert provided his ideas:

If we have a source, we can easily find about what is the topic. It help us for give an information...I think, it's very important. When you do not know anything about your work. You cannot doing anything, therefore you have to get some help from it. (Mert)

Caner acknowledged Mert’s ideas and invited the other learners to contribute to this discussion:

Exactly, sources help us find information about a topic that we are researching. Without sources, we may not provide enough details or scientific evidence, etc...Thank you Mert...What do the others think? (Caner’s feedback to Mert’s post)

Mert continued his contributions to the discussion by explaining how he made use of sources. Then, Caner warned Mert of the dangers of relying too much on sources:

If you depend on the source completely, or if you use all the source, with the necessary and unnecessary parts, it is a lot of work, waste of time, but more importantly, stealing information by copy paste; this is called PLAGIARISM (information theft) and is against the academic rules...Many thanks Mert... (Caner)

From the above example, it is evident that a meaningful discussion took place between Caner and his student, Mert, regarding the use of sources and its benefits. Also, learners gained a deeper understanding of the task when the teacher took the opportunity to warn his students about plagiarism, an example of scaffolding. However, contributions to the online discussions were not free of weaknesses. Many cases were observed where learners ignored the teachers' feedback and gave no further response.

#### *Showing understanding of others' posts by commenting on their ideas*

In social situations, it is important that people show understanding of what other people say. In this respect, a more natural, colloquial talk in written form was observed and recorded on the discussion forum. This natural talk was first in the form of agreement/disagreement of their peers' opinions by using basic structures such as "I agree with..." and then responding to the original question raised by the teacher:

I agree with ... I think the body paragraph must tell us about main idea or topic and we must understand what is it about. (Burak)

#### *Asking for and giving clarification*

Asking for clarification when one is confused is a natural process of understanding. As such, the learning environment incorporated opportunities for learners to ask questions. However, learners did not seem to make use of this feature within the learning environment. Instead, learners approached teachers and verbally asked for help. Even though from the discussion above, it is evident that learners have displayed the ability to accomplish the objectives of the activity and its subtasks with the necessary competencies, learners seemed to lack awareness of the importance of responding to others' posts or providing clarification when an issue had not been dealt with.

### **Written production (article)**

CEFR "can do" statements, referring to written production, have driven the evaluation of the written artefacts in terms of content and linguistic competency. Each of these is described below in more detail.

#### *Content*

Content was analysed in terms of task fulfilment, coherence and unity of the written artefact. Task fulfilment of the articles was predetermined by the task instructions which were to gather information and bring solutions or suggestions for improvement to a problematic issue. Six descriptors that guided the assessment of the content of the compositions are described below.

Figure 4 shows an example of a student's written product which was analysed to see whether the learning activity had provided the necessary conditions and opportunities for the learners to accomplish the tasks at the required level. The learner, Emre, chose the task of providing suggestions to the Mayor of Famagusta on entertainment for young people.

When Emre's composition on entertainment is analysed with respect to the task, it can be seen that this student:

- can develop an argument with justification: He has provided reason why Famagusta does not have enough entertainment venues for young people by indicating the government's lack of time. He also mentioned that the reason for choosing the water activity is that there is currently nothing similar to it available at present, illustrating that he:
- can support argument with relevant examples: In the composition, Emre has exemplified how he believes the activity is fun by describing it and thus demonstrates that he:
- can organise ideas in a logical manner: Emre's composition was well paragraphed. He initially described his reason for choosing this topic and continued to describe the activity in detail. He concluded that he had no experience of the activity but predicted it will be popular among young people like him. Emre, thus, conveyed his ideas clearly.

## Entertainment is good with balloons on the water

In my opinion, Cyprus hasn't got enough entertainment centres for young people. Famagusta is a student city. Therefore, there isn't too much entertainment. What is the reason for this situation? Because the government hasn't got enough time.

I will tell you about my topic. I chose entertainment topic because it is not popular in Cyprus and in Turkey. Maybe one day it can be. You are taken care by instructors into the human hamster ball on water; water zorbs are enjoyable. You have a good time while playing. That's entertaining. It takes a little time to master but with some practice you will be able to stand and walk - or even dash on water for 50m or more! You can also do tricks, rolls, spins, flips and tumbles. If you play with it for five minutes, you will become exhausted. There is a balloon and person is pulled in balloon. The balloon is inflated and it is controlled by instructors. After you are inside the ball you can start to enjoy the experience. The zorbs are operated on the lake. You don't need any specialist equipment just a sense of fun.

I haven't tried it yet. However I want to try it. As I said above, **WATER ZORBES** are not popular in my country. Apparently it is good and enjoyable but we must try it to learn. Eventually, if it can come to Cyprus. Everybody wonders about it and will try it. So when it comes to Cyprus, it will be very popular with young people.

Resource : <http://www.lee-leisure.co.uk/waterzorbs.shtml>

Figure 4. Emre's composition

This shows that the *Examining Essays* forum has supported learners to develop knowledge by applying compositional elements to produce a coherent and unified piece of writing. Emre has also shown evidence that he:

- can select appropriate information to address target audience: The information that Emre chose to use, such as the way the balloon functions in water, was appropriate, as he needed to indicate why he believed the activity would be fun and enjoyed by young people in order for the Mayor of Famagusta to finance it. Accordingly, he has also shown he:
- can locate desired information to support idea/s: Since Emre was able to describe the activity with information that he located from a source, it can be said that he has demonstrated the ability to locate desired information to support his ideas.

However, although some learners felt the need to use information from other sources, not all referenced these correctly. For example, in his composition Emre provided a link to indicate that he made use of a source to support his ideas. However, this lacks in-text referencing so it can be concluded that, he:

- can use information located from sources to support idea/s, but *without* reference: Referencing has been identified to be a weakness of the learning environment and thus it was planned to add instructional materials and activities for the next teaching cycle.

The overall analysis of the written product shows that learners selected appropriate information to address the intended audience, organised information logically, and therefore, developed an argument appropriate to their chosen task and justified it accordingly by providing examples to support the argument. This indicates that the learning environment assisted learners in developing their written production skills at the required level – B1.

### *Linguistic competency*

The CEFR is a guiding document that does not prescribe, but describes how a learner functions as a social agent at the six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2). The core of the CEFR is a set of communicative language activities and communicative language competences (North, 2007). The communicative competencies are subdivided into linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies. For this research, focus was on linguistic



competencies. This is again subdivided into range (general linguistic range and vocabulary range) and control (grammatical accuracy and vocabulary control). The CEFR does not specify which linguistic features or lexical items are characteristic of each level but rather embeds them in “*can do*” statements that describe how the learner’s language should function for each level.

One of the propositions of this study was that authentic activities provide the opportunity to use the target language in context as it is used in real life, unlike traditional school type activities that provide limited opportunities to use a rich range of vocabulary and linguistic features. This proposition is expanded below.

### *Vocabulary*

Lists of vocabulary developed for B1 level contained 2000 words (Milton, 2010). Thus, targeting the first 2000-word level provided the necessary opportunities for learners to learn and practice these words. Researchers argue for the fundamental importance of the first 2000 words and advise that:

If learners do not know the most frequent 2000 or 3000 words in English, they will have severe difficulties in understanding most written and spoken text and it will make it even more difficult to engage actively in written and spoken communication. (Stæhr, 2008, p. 150)

For this research, Paul Nation’s “Range program with GSL/AWL list” was used to analyse the range of vocabulary used by learners throughout the activity. During the data collection process, it was discovered that all learners had read all the posts on the discussion forums, together with all the articles written by their peers. Analysing the text and articles used on the discussion forums provided rich data on the vocabulary learners were exposed to in written form.

For each class, all text on the discussion forums, including the questions written by the teachers and all published articles, were analysed. Some adjustments were made; for example, proper names were removed. Table 2 displays vocabulary used by Ceyda’s (another participant teacher) class. Learners were able to practice 1745 different words in context, and 567 of these words were from different word families of the first 1000 most frequent words. Accordingly, learners were able to practice more than a total of 949 different words from the different family types. The other two classes had a similar outcome.

*Table 2. The output created by Range program based on the vocabulary used in Ceyda’s class*

Word list	Tokens/%	Types/%	Families
First 1000	13025/82.86	983/56.33	567
Second 1000	1188/ 7.56	271/15.53	197
Third 1000	919/ 5.85	247/14.15	185
Not in the list	587/ 3.73	244/13.98	Unknown
Total	15719	1745	949

This finding confirms the previous research studies which claim that incidental learning through reading has an important place in language education (Waring & Nation, 2004) and learners in higher levels (as in B1) can learn new words by meeting the new word fewer times in comparison to learners at lower levels (Zahar, Cobb, & Spada, 2001).

### *Grammar*

The CEFR suggests a grammatical span across the levels by describing the domain that defines the use of certain semantic functions. Table 3 below represents to what degree the learner can use the language and is tabulated as grammatical accuracy in B1.

*Table 3. Grammatical accuracy in B1 (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 114)*

Grammatical accuracy
Communicates with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts; generally good control though with noticeable mother tongue influence. Errors occur, but it is clear what he/she is trying to express
Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used ‘routines’ and patterns associated with more predictable situations.

This part of the study was designed to determine if the foreign language learning environment could provide opportunities for learners to develop their language skills in their journey towards becoming Independent Users of English at B1. Descriptors are expanded below.

### *Using a sufficient range of language to express ideas*

In Emre's composition, there were a sufficient range of complex sentences and grammar structures present to cater for the requirement of the B1 level. He used different grammatical structures appropriate to conveying his message, for example, conditionals and passives. Though these were not used frequently, he chose these structures to state what happens under certain conditions or when focusing on action. In general, Emre preferred to use simple structures, such as present simple when generalising, or giving factual information although this did not impede his overall communicative adequacy. He was also able to use language with good control for adequate communication. As Kuiken, Vedder, and Gilabert (2010) mention, communicative adequacy and to what extent the learner is able to complete the task is influenced by accuracy rather than the complexity of grammar.

### **Spoken production (presentation and artefact)**

The broad CEFR “*can do*” statements referring to spoken production—“can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points”—has driven the evaluation of the presentations in the terms of content, presentation skills, and collaboration. Eight descriptors from the CEFR B1 level guided the overall assessment of spoken production: Learners can: (1) select appropriate information to address the target audience; (2) explain the main points relating to the topic with reasonable accuracy; (3) understand and answer most questions asked about topic; (4) ask questions to support further understanding; (5) maintain eye contact to hold attention; (6) speak clearly with little or no hesitation; (7) select appropriate visuals to support topic; (8) collaborate with partner and share work load.

Emre's spoken production was typical of other students'. He was able to fulfil most of the “*can do*” statements. For example, he chose appropriate information to address the target audience, information as to why he thought his chosen type of entertainment would be best for the young people of Famagusta. He chose to describe the activity and also add an element of excitement by referring to challenges and fun, and also mentioned why he believed that water zorbs should come to Cyprus:

Maybe water zorbs can be like competition. As everyone knows students want to every time fun. ... Cyprus is an island therefore this sport must be in Cyprus. I think water zorbs is suitable for Cyprus because Cyprus has too many students. (A script from Emre's presentation)

His language was accurate enough to convey his message. Additionally, it was clear that the discussion on giving effective presentations on the discussion forum was useful since Emre, like all other participant students, was able to manage eye contact, use visuals to support his presentation and speak clearly with little hesitation.

## **Discussion**

One of the key outcomes of DBR is a set of context-based design principles. Based on the findings and the continuous literature review, 11 design principles were derived from the initial design principles for authentic activities in EFL, and we argue that appropriate implementation of these characteristics have the potential to provide necessary conditions for language acquisition to occur in EFL contexts. Thus, authentic activities:

- have real world relevance
- are complex and ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity over a sustained period of time
- provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources
- provide the opportunity to collaborate
- provide the opportunity to reflect
- lead beyond domain—and skill—specific outcomes
- are seamlessly integrated with assessment
- yield polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else

- are open-ended allowing competing solutions and diversity of outcome
- are conducive to both learning and communicating
- provide motivational factors

The use of authentic activities has led to the creation of a computer-assisted foreign language learning environment where learners interact with each other (see characteristic 4) on various topics over a sustained period of time (characteristic 2) through the discussion forum contributions (characteristics 3 and 5) for a real purpose (characteristics 8 and 9) that, in turn, assisted in the development or practice of various language skills in context (characteristic 1). It should be noted that students were enthusiastic and mainly completed the required tasks (characteristic 11). Learner motivation was achieved through providing ownership on the problem and the process to solve it, providing a challenge that is tied to a goal, providing freedom and control, providing authentic roles, targeting an authentic problem and authentic audience, and publishing student work (characteristics 6 and 10).

### **Written interaction (online discussions)**

Contributions to the discussion forums indicated that learners developed their language skills under three broad sub-headings—content, opinion, and contribution to understanding. Their posts provided evidence that they understood what was expected and responded appropriately. The learners' language was not always accurate but their message was understandable. Another attribute displayed was expressing and supporting opinion. Discussions supported knowledge development on issues such as the importance of using a source and the components of an essay. Learners displayed the ability to contribute to the discussion forums to support further understanding, though this was in most cases limited to their first contribution. Additionally, learners were exposed to an extensive amount of vocabulary and language as they gave feedback on others' essays on the discussion form. They had the opportunity to use language for a real purpose, develop knowledge on different topics and improve language competency through the discussion board contributions and collaboration.

### **Written production (articles)**

In the articles, learners developed an argument appropriate to their chosen task and justified it accordingly by providing examples, organizing ideas logically, and selecting appropriate information for the target audience. The two sub-headings (content and linguistic competency) drove the analysis of the articles. This indicated that the learners' interaction with the learning environment through discussion forum contributions assisted both content and linguistic development on the articles.

### **Spoken production (presentation and artefact)**

During the presentations, content, presentation skills and collaboration were examined. Learners were able to provide details of their topic and most selected appropriate information. Presentation skills indicated that the discussion forum on presentation tips was effective. During the presentations, learners were also required to reflect on their learning and the process. This class collaboration assisted learners in developing awareness that the activity provided them with opportunities to learn and practice know how, and supported each other in language development.

### **Limitations and future recommendations**

Although the study has mostly achieved its aims, there were some limitations. First, the size of participants (10 students and 3 teachers) may seem small to generalize the results for larger groups. Nevertheless, each of these respondents provided a wide range of data (both written and spoken) which enabled the researchers to delve deeply into how the new learning environment increased the EFL students' authentic learning opportunities. It is likely that if applied in larger groups similar results would emerge out of the study. Second limitation is related to the learning environment. In future iterations, more guidance to have learner-learner interaction for effective responses in giving and seeking clarification should be promoted. There is also a need to add guidance for referencing to avoid plagiarism. In terms of the spoken production of learners, the interaction between the presenter and his/her audience needs addressing, for example, by asking questions. Moreover, a third cycle is

suggested to assist teachers by providing training for a smoother implementation process. It may also be logical to replicate the study by redesigning tasks for lower CEFR levels such as A1 and A2.

## Conclusion

The findings indicate that the learning activity was successfully linked with the characteristics of authentic activities to develop the relevant competencies at the B1 level. In particular, learners were able to express their ideas and opinions on various topics. They were exposed to an extensive range of vocabulary and language. They had multiple opportunities to use the target language in context. Higher order thinking skills also developed as learners were provided with opportunities to analyse and discuss others' work and make judgments on how to improve it. Consequently, the findings suggest that the learning environment based on 11 characteristics of authentic activities in EFL promoted the use of the target language as a tool to convey messages adequately, both in written and spoken form, and facilitated learning new linguistic elements in context. Another key implication of authentic activities is that the learning environment lent itself to close the gap between language acquired in foreign language learning settings and the real world.

We strongly believe that in contexts where the target language is not spoken outside the school, using the guiding characteristics of authentic activities will provide opportunities for learners to use the target language in context for a purpose. This in turn will facilitate the internalization of the newly acquired linguistic structures. Moreover, teaching in language classes do not—and should not—focus exclusively on teaching a language but also on developing higher order thinking and problem-solving skills, also referred to as life skills. Thus, we propose that designing tasks taking into consideration the characteristics suggested in this study will provide learners with the opportunity to develop not only their language skills, but also important life skills.

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