

THE *GLOBALIZED* DISCOURSE OF EDUCATION: POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES OF GLOBALIZING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH DIGITALIZATION

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Abstract This study presents a case-based exploration of how foreign language acquisition can be reimagined through an integrated meta-educational discourse in today's increasingly digitalized educational landscape. Drawing on findings from three international projects: LanGuide, TeachME, GIRO – focused on cultural literacy, Neurodidactics in blended learning environments, and *gamification* – the research identifies advantages and challenges of incorporating educational technology into language acquisition, by investigating the complex interplay between cognitive engagement, cultural awareness, and digital interactivity. In addition to theoretical perspectives, the paper also considers key pragmatic dimensions such as learners' cultural integration, equitable access to technology, and the growing concern of social isolation in hyper-digital settings. Ultimately, the study argues for the development of a *globalized* (global + digital) instructional framework, enhanced by artificial intelligence, that supports more inclusive, context-sensitive, and culturally aware language education practices, co-indexing the ELITE-AI project.

Keywords Cultural literacy, *culturacy*, Neurodidactics, *gamification*, foreign language acquisition, globalization, *globalization*, digitalized instructional discourse, AI in education, digital pragmatics.

1. Introduction

In our increasingly digitized and digitalized world, educators employ digital tools to effortlessly develop and distribute course materials, engage with students remotely, offer prompt feedback,

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and monitor progress in real-time. At the same time, learners gain access to a diverse range of educational resources, available at their convenience and pace. Furthermore, digital learning tools facilitate collaborative, interactive experiences that enable active engagement, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities,¹ highlight how these tools can also activate the ‘3F dimension (friendly, familiar, and fun),’ promoting enjoyable and stimulating learning experiences through *gamification*. Consequently, digital learning tools revolutionize education, enhancing accessibility and effectiveness.

However, challenges arise as foreign language (FL) teaching navigates the dual framework of communication and digitalization that characterizes today’s educational landscape. This complexity is evident in various aspects, from the collaborative efforts of mixed research teams merging IT and applied linguistics to develop cohesive mobile language applications (Nechifor and Dimulescu 2021²; 2024³), to the ongoing integration of cultural elements as a prospective fifth skill in language acquisition (Nechifor and Borca 2016⁴; 2020⁵). Additionally, the potential utility of integrating AI into humanities and language classes adds another layer of complexity. As such, a pragmatic examination of the global array of educational activities in the digital era is essential to assess both its advantages and drawbacks.

On the positive side, digitalization broadens access to language learning resources regardless of geographical, ethnical, or gender constraints. Through online platforms and mobile applications, learners from diverse backgrounds can access a wide range of educational materials, interactive exercises, and multimedia content tailored to their linguistic needs. This democratization of access empowers individuals in remote areas or underprivileged communities to engage with language learning resources that were previously inaccessible. As noted by Zawacki-Richter et al.,⁶ there is a growing prevalence of educational software, mobile applications, and games among students. These resources are crafted to encourage dynamic and adaptable learning, accessible across various devices such as smartphones and tablets. They aim

¹ Andreea Nechifor, Răzvan Săftoiu, Georgiana Burbea and Ionuț Căpeneată, “GIRO – Towards a Gamified Approach to Teaching Romanian as a FL, in *Conference Proceedings. 15th International Conference Innovation in Language Learning*, ed. by Pixel. (Filodiritto, 2022), 324-331.

² Andreea Nechifor and Cristina Dimulescu, “Integrating Culture in Teaching ESP via the LanGuide Mobile Application,” *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series IV*, no. 14 /63 (2021): 83-100.

³ Andreea Nechifor and Cristina Dimulescu, “Unlocking ESP Potential: A Culture-Infused Approach to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning,” *Analele Universităţii Ovidius Constanta. Seria Filologie* no. 35/1 (2024): 354 – 375.

⁴ Andreea Nechifor and Ana Borca, “The Importance of the Cultural Element in Teaching a Foreign Language,” *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series VII*, no. 9/58 (2016): 99–108.

⁵ Andreea Nechifor and Ana Borca, “Contextualising Culture in Teaching a Foreign Language: The Cultural Element among Cultural Awareness, Cultural Competency and Cultural Literacy,” *Philologica Jassyensia*, no. 16/2 (2020): 287–304.

⁶ Olaf Zawacki-Richter, Victoria. I. Marín, Melissa Bond and Franziska Gouverneur, “Systematic Review of Research on Artificial Intelligence Applications in Higher Education – Where Are the Educators?,” *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, no. 16/1 (2019): 1-30.

to gamify the learning process and offer personalized learning experiences, ultimately enhancing student motivation.⁷

Furthermore, digitalization enhances the flexibility and customization of language learning experiences. Learners can choose from a wide range of digital tools and platforms that cater to different learning styles and proficiency levels. Whether through interactive tutorials, virtual classrooms, or language forums, students can personalize their learning journey according to their pace and preferences. Thus, self-directed learning, autonomy, and a student-centric approach have become integral components of effective language acquisition. All these, make the profile of a gamified approach, which, according to Werbach and Hunter (2015⁸; 2020⁹) represent the main characteristics of the principle of *gamification* alongside the element of fun, the possibility to make choices, the creation of a sense of community, the establishment of progression, thus building motivation and boosting confidence.

Moreover, digitalization facilitates real-time communication and collaboration among learners and instructors across the globe. This intercultural exchange not only enhances language proficiency but also allows cross-cultural understanding and empathy, enriching the learning experience beyond linguistic boundaries. Through video conferencing, blended learning and telecollaboration,¹⁰ instant messaging, and online forums, students can engage in immersive language practice with native speakers and fellow learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, multimedia materials, such as videos, animations, and simulations, as noted by Zawacki-Richter et al.,¹¹ offer a dynamic approach to learning. Additionally, online communication tools, including e-mail, discussion forums, and instant messaging, as highlighted by Seaman et al. (2018),¹² play a pivotal role in enhancing the learning experience. These resources are versatile, applicable across various subjects and educational levels, and provide an interactive platform for students to explore complex topics. Moreover, they facilitate engaging pragmatic learning scenarios. These tools not only enable students to interact with their peers but also facilitate communication with instructors. Students can collaborate in pairs or groups for projects and receive valuable feedback on their work. Particularly for learners studying remotely or with limited on-site interaction with their peers and tutors, online communication tools are indispensable.

⁷ Georgiana Burbea, Ionuț Căpeneasă, Andreea Nechifor and Răzvan Săftoiu, "Stimuler la Motivation des Apprenants Lors de L'enseignement du Roumain en tant que Langue Étrangère," *Analele Universității București. Limba și literatura română [AUBLLR]*, no. 71 (2022): 3-20.

⁸ Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter, *The Gamification Toolkit* (Wharton School Press, 2015).

⁹ Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter, *For the Win: The Power of Gamification and Game Thinking in Business, Education, Government, and Social Impact* (Wharton School Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Andreea Nechifor, "On Blended Learning: Japanese and Romanian Telecollaboration – Positives and Negatives," *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series VII*, no. 8/57 (2015): 43-50.

¹¹ Zawacki-Richter et. al, "Systematic Review," 1-30

¹² Julia. E. Seaman, Elaine I. Allen, and Jeff Seaman, *Grade Increase: Tracking Distance Education in the United States* (Babson Survey Research Group, 2018).

However, one prominent concern in Hynes' view¹³ is the potential loss of cultural authenticity and linguistic diversity in the learning process. The risk involved refers to standardizing language instruction, thus neglecting the rich cultural nuances and dialectical variations inherent in language usage, undermining the authenticity of language learning experiences, and diluting the essence of linguistic and cultural immersion. The dominance of major languages and cultures due to global digital platforms, can lead to concerns about the homogenization of cultural content, emphasizing how powerful these platforms can dissipate diverse cultural expressions by promoting a dominant culture, which could directly escalate the concerns about digital language learning environments.

Still on the negative side, the digital division exacerbates inequalities regarding access to quality language education. While digitalization promises inclusivity, socio-economic factors such as access to high-speed internet, digital devices, and technological literacy remain barriers for marginalized communities. Consequently, those lacking adequate resources may be further sidelined in the digital language learning landscape, widening the educational gap and perpetuating discrimination. Thus, according to OECD¹⁴ and Warschauer,¹⁵ students from low-income families or who attend underdeveloped schools from a technical point of view may not have access to the same number of digital tools as their peers. This can restrict their ability to fully engage in digital learning activities and can influence their general academic performance. Still in Warschauer's opinion,¹⁶ students not so familiar with digital tools or lacking essential computer skills may struggle to use digital tools effectively. This can affect their ability to complete digital assignments, as well as their future career perspectives.

Last, but not least, another drawback refers to the fact that overreliance on digital platforms may diminish the role of human interaction and interpersonal communication in language learning. Language acquisition is not solely about mastering grammar rules and vocabulary, as Barnlund¹⁷ masterfully profiles 'the fluent fool', but also about developing communicative competence and socio-pragmatic skills through meaningful interactions. Excessive screen time and isolated learning experiences in digital environments may inhibit the development of these essential interpersonal skills, preventing holistic language proficiency.

Consequently, to exploit the full potential of digitalization in language acquisition, it is imperative to strike a balance between maximizing the potential of technology as a facilitator of learning and preserving the richness of linguistic and cultural diversity. The globalization of language teaching through digitalization presents a double-edged sword: offering

¹³ Mike Hynes, "Towards cultural homogenization," in *The Social, Cultural and Environmental Costs of Hyper-Connectivity: Sleeping through the Revolution*, ed. Mike Hynes (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 39-54.

¹⁴ OECD, *Students, Computers, and Learning: Making the Connection* (OECD Publishing, 2015).

¹⁵ Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (MIT Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dean Barnlund, "Communicating in a Global Village," in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, ed. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 4-14.

unprecedented opportunities for accessibility, flexibility, and intercultural exchange, while posing challenges related to cultural authenticity, equity, and interpersonal communication.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The aim of the study is to present a comprehensive overview of language acquisition mechanisms and language teaching methodologies under the umbrella of applied linguistics, as essentially described by Ellis,¹⁸ Davies and Elder,¹⁹ Gass and Selinker,²⁰ Cook and North,²¹ Schmitt and Celce-Murcia,²² and Lightbown and Spada,²³ in the context of digitalization, with some focus on language for specific purposes, addressing both its advantages and disadvantages.

The research question that the study aims to answer is: How can digital tools be effectively integrated into foreign language education to enhance learning outcomes while addressing potential drawbacks such as cultural homogenization and unequal access? In this regard, it proposes a fresh perspective within a contemporary framework, provided by three specific projects as examples of digitalized language education, tailored to meet the demands of the present-day students, while new approaches are explored, as a result of firsthand research and implementation, alongside the modern communicative paradigm, which is complemented by the insights of the current trends generated by and adapted to the needs of the present generations of learners.

Subsequently, the integration of *gamification* into FL teaching classes, as examined by the Romanian research team of the GIRO national project,²⁴ alongside the exploration of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), and Web-Assisted Language Learning (WALL) in class, as observed by the international team of the LanGuide Erasmus+ project,²⁵ and a resurgence of interest in the principles of Neurodidactics in a blended learning environment, as pursued by the specialists of the TeachME Erasmus+ project,²⁶ all take place against the background of education's greatest challenge: artificial intelligence (AI) and its associated tools, as it will be detailed upon by the international team of the ELITE-AI Erasmus+ project.²⁷ These

¹⁸ Rod Ellis, *Second Language Acquisition* (OUP, 1997).

¹⁹ Alan Davies and Catherine Elder (eds.), *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

²⁰ Gass Susan M. and Larry Selinker, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* (Routledge, 2008).

²¹ Guy Cook and Sarah North, *Applied Linguistics in Action: A Reader* (Routledge, 2010).

²² Norbert Schmitt and Marianne Celce-Murcia, "An Overview of Applied Linguistics," in *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, ed. Norbert Schmitt (Hodder Education, 2010), 1–16.

²³ Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, *How Languages are Learned* (OUP, 2013).

²⁴ GIRO (*Gamification-Based Instruction for Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language* - <https://giro.unitbv.ro/>)

²⁵ LanGuide (*Language guidance tool for improving language knowledge* - <https://languageguide.si>)

²⁶ TeachMe (*Multimedia Didactics. The Art and Science of Teaching Host Country Language* - <https://www.teachmeproject.eu/>)

²⁷ ELITE-AI - *Empowering Specialized Language Acquisition with Integrated AI* - <https://elite-ai.unitbv.ro/>)

topics deserve discussion alongside external factors that influence the use of digital tools in academia, as evidenced by the perspectives of first-year students from *Transilvania University of Braşov* (Dimulescu and Nechifor 2024).²⁸

1.2. Premises: Factors Impacting Digital Learning Tool Utilization among First-Year Students at *Transilvania University of Braşov*

A key consideration in all three case studies below is represented by contextualizing learner perspective, which helps emphasizing the importance of user's needs in the design and implementation of digital language learning tools.

Thus, in their comprehensive academic study examining how external factors influence first-year philology students at *Transilvania University of Braşov* (UNITBV) regarding their use of digital learning tools, Dimulescu and Nechifor (2024)²⁹ expended on the General Extended Technology Acceptance Model for E-Learning (GETAMEL) to understand the impact of various factors such as experience, subjective norms, enjoyment, computer anxiety, and self-efficacy on students' perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU) of these tools. 120 first-year students from various academic profiles at the Faculty of Letters of UNITBV participated in this empirical study, their anonymity being ensured by an electronic form data collection questionnaire that excluded personal information to create a safe environment. All 120 students voluntarily participated, with 65.8% aged between 18 and 19, and 34.2% aged between 20 and 29. Most respondents were female (77.5%), followed by males (18.3%), just a small percentage selecting another gender option.

The study employed a quantitative approach to investigate student perceptions regarding the usage of digital learning tools and data were gathered through sixteen closed-ended questions featuring predetermined multiple-choice responses, and the Likert scale. Quantitative methods such as scoring, rating, counting, and percentage analysis were used for data analysis. The values obtained were compared, contrasted, and correlated to validate hypotheses and address the research question.

As indicated by the study in detail, the key findings clearly pinpointed that, in terms of external factors, family, friends, and classmates significantly affect students' attitudes towards the usage of digital tools. Also, a supportive environment enhances comfort with the utilization of these tools, as well as technology accessibility, access to technology varying and thus influencing students' ability to engage with digital learning effectively. Regarding digital literacy

²⁸ Cristina Dimulescu and Andreea Nechifor, "External Factors Influencing First-Year Students' Usage of Digital Learning Tools at Transilvania University of Braşov," in *Proceedings of International Scientific Conference 20th Mate Demarin Day 'Diversity and Interdisciplinarity in Education*, ed. Iva Blažević, Marina Diković, Ines Kovačić, Lorena Lazarić and Jelena Gugić. (Juraj Dobrila Pula University Publishing House, 2024), 251-274.

²⁹ Dimulescu and Nechifor, "External Factors," 251-274. The students' participation in this study was secured by the UNITBV'S Ethics Committee approval no. 32 /27.02.2023.

and anxiety, higher digital literacy correlates with greater ease and utility perceived in digital tools, whereas computer anxiety negatively affects this perception.

As learning impact, the study confirms that students who find digital tools easy to use and useful are more likely to integrate them into their learning processes, enhancing their educational experience, while for future implications, the results suggest that educational institutions should consider these factors when implementing digital tools to enhance their effectiveness and acceptance among students. Thus, the study emphasizes the necessity for educational institutions to encourage an environment that supports digital literacy and reduces computer anxiety to optimize the educational benefits of digital tools.

Therefore, considering the premises outlined by the insights into the correlation between potential motivational factors for digital tool usage and their impact on the overall language acquisition process, various projects were implemented to identify potential solutions closely aligned with the framework provided by this study.

2. Case-Study: International Projects and their Outcomes – Design, Implementation and Solutions for Capitalizing on Technology as a Facilitator of Learning and Preserving the Richness of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

This chapter provides an overview of the three educational projects mentioned above, that concentrate on integrating the digital component into various educational environments, whether mobile, academic, or blended. It highlights the practical considerations made by the experts involved to mitigate the drawbacks, ensuring that the outcomes of their research are tailored to meet the needs and demands of users and beneficiaries in real-world settings.

Closely aligned with the preceding chapter, this section illustrates the outcomes achieved by each of the three projects within the central scope of this paper's framework and the perspectives it seeks to establish for a *globalized* instructional discourse. It delves into how each project devised a practical solution or approach to address the challenges identified at the beginning of this study.

2.1. LanGuide – Exploring ESP Effectiveness: Incorporating Culture in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

The Erasmus+ LanGuide project aimed to integrate FL learning into a mobile application,³⁰ with a close mix of specific cultural elements. This integration was designed to cater to recipients' specific language needs while also embedding significant cultural nuances relevant to various professional and educational domains. The model involved the design of language exercises tailored for specific fields like mobility exchanges, clerical/organizational work, computer science, and academic performance. These exercises were then integrated into a mobile

³⁰ Available at: <https://languide.si/en/the-languide-app>.

application, allowing learners to practice language skills, grammar, and vocabulary pertinent to their specific areas of interest.

The project was a collaborative effort between linguists from universities in Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Croatia, and IT experts from universities in Croatia and Sweden. This multidisciplinary team worked together to develop and refine language exercises and a digital platform. The exercises and content were designed for three types of users: undergraduates, instructors/professors, and the organizational body, each with varying needs and proficiency levels.

In terms of data collection tools, a Content Management Platform (CMP) was developed to host and manage the language exercises created. This platform allowed for the adaptation and formatting of exercises into various types such as drag-and-drop and multiple-choice, the resulting core database consisting of 623 English language exercises, 177 Romanian, 173 Croatian, 151 Italian, 338 Slovenian, and 363 Spanish. In the post-development stage of the CMP creation, a mobile application was generated, which served as the primary tool for delivering the exercises to the end-users, enabling on-the-go learning and practice.

The process began with the linguistic team developing the tasks, which were reviewed and adapted to multiple languages. The IT team then incorporated these exercises into the CMP. Before its official launch, the mobile application underwent extensive testing and feedback sessions to fully align it with the educational goals of the project and to ensure user-friendly functionality.

The exercises were designed to be culturally relevant and incorporated real-life situations that learners might encounter. This practical application aimed to enhance the usability and educational value of the language learning process. Feedback from initial users was critically analyzed to make iterative improvements to the exercises and the overall functionality of the mobile application. However, one notable aspect distinguishes the LanGuide mobile application: some of the English exercises incorporate cultural elements belonging to and defining the countries that may host exchange mobilities among the partner institutions involved in the project. This feature addresses the needs of potential end-users (exchange students, teachers, or members of the administration in Erasmus+ mobilities) and challenges both Gay's (2002)³¹ and Risager's (2005)³² opinions regarding which culture should be integrated in the exercises provided to the candidates for learning a new language, i.e., their own or that of the target language. Thus, even if the beneficiaries of the mobile application may need to polish their English before they learn basic words in the host country's language, still their perspective of feeling included and accepted and their sense of belonging to the community they will be temporarily part of (for only 4, 6, or 12 months) need to be addressed at the same time. Hence, this process must begin before they start learning the host-country language, in this scenario the LangGuide application offering the possibility not only to refine the users'

³¹ Geneva Gay, "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching," *Journal of Teacher Education*, no. 53/2 (2002): 106-116.

³² Karen Risager, "Languaculture as a Key Concept in Language And Culture Teaching," in *The Consequence of Mobility*, ed. Bent Preisler, Anne H. Fabricius, Hartmut Haberland, Susanne Kjaerbeck and Karen Risager (Roskilde University, 2005), 185-196

English language, but also to be exposed to the host country's cultural elements even before taking the step to choose the host language to be learnt through the same application.

2.1.1. LanGuide – Digital Pragmatics: Making the Words Fit the World by Assigning an Assertive Force to the Tasks Created within the Digital Frame

As highlighted by Nechifor and Dimulescu for the case of the Romanian experience,³³ LanGuide adopted a distinctive strategy when integrating cultural aspects into its mobile application exercises. As already mentioned, it combined two perspectives to design task environments customized for each exercise, thereby integrating cultural elements from the host countries' languages into the drills specifically crafted for the English language. So, in accordance with Kramsch's view,³⁴ but in an original manner, the tasks submitted to the CMP and then included in the mobile application promoted culture and community, through different means, such as: institutional names (*Transilvania* University of Braşov, Faculty of Letters, Centre for Learning Modern Languages, the Department of Continuous Education), individual proper names (generated in line with the characteristic Romanian suffixation system), starting from real reference names of existing persons to sometimes simply anagramming them: Silvana Enescu, Lorena Davidescu, Simona Columbeanu, Mr. Lăzărescu, Cristiana Demetrescu, Cornelia Dragu, alongside geographical references (Braşov – “situated in the heart of the country”), location markers (Colina – the main location where faculties' buildings are situated), classroom designations like T18, I129, the address of The Rectorate building: “20 Eroilor Blvd,” and local educational customs, such as the prefix in the telephone number applicable to Romania: 004, the name of a reputable taxi service: Martax, the institutional email and platform domain extension: @unitbv.ro.

All these represented various ways through which localization was insinuated within the globalized discourse. Thus, exercises containing Romanian cultural elements tailored for targeted types of users, designed to enhance English language acquisition in specific professional domains were integrated into the mobile application, with focus on different language skills and for all the levels considered.

Other illustrations would refer to a graph analysis exercise on the topic of student dropout rates, addressing reading comprehension and data interpretation, which had the learners read a detailed account of student dropout rates over an academic year, observing fluctuations due to various causes such as exam periods and motivational declines. The task required them to select the correct graph that represented these trends from multiple options. This exercise not only enhanced reading and analytical skills but also familiarized learners with administrative language and university processes in a culturally specific context.

³³ Nechifor and Dimulescu, “Integrating Culture,” 83-100.

³⁴ Claire Kramsch, “Culture in foreign language teaching,” *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, no. 1/1 (2013): 57-78.

Another example consisted of a dialogue matching exercise, focused on verbal exchanges in the secretarial office, thus requiring users to practice speaking and listening. The exercise presented learners with a series of dialogues that are likely to occur at UNITBV's secretarial offices. Students had to match visitors' queries with the secretary's responses, ranging from accommodation inquiries to arranging transportation. Thus, this activity was designed not only to improve conversational skills, but more interestingly to help learners navigate common administrative interactions within the academic setting of the host country. An alternative functionally motivating conversation at the same university focused on the use of grammar prepositional phrase completion in context and asked students to fill in the blanks with appropriate prepositions in sentences that described various university-related scenarios, such as the location of the dean's office or the whereabouts of the staff members. This exercise focused on the accurate use of prepositions, a fundamental aspect of English grammar, while contextualizing the language learning in everyday academic operations.

The productive language skills were incorporated as well in the application, with tasks revolving around topics such as: the Erasmus+ program – problems with a study mobility (Speaking) or interview and acceptance letters (Writing), thus addressing practical issues such as interactive scenarios or documents' discourses. In the role-play set-up, learners were presented with various challenges they might face during a study mobility, such as losing their way on campus or needing local currency. The exercise included potential secretarial responses that students had to match to the described problems, the activity aiming both to develop practical speaking skills and to equip learners with the language necessary to solve common issues encountered in particular host country academic settings. At the same time, the functional writing exercise involved reordering mixed paragraphs to correctly assemble an invitation to an interview and a letter of acceptance. By engaging with authentic administrative texts, learners could practice recognizing and understanding formal language structures and develop skills in document structure. This task not only improved writing skills but also familiarized learners with the formal communication styles used in academic and professional settings, with focus on the Romanian approach to functional text-drafting.

All in all, these exercises, designed to provide practical, real-world applications of language skills, integrated cultural elements and real-life contexts into the learning process, making the language acquisition not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about understanding and navigating the cultural and administrative landscapes of a foreign academic environment.

2.2. GIRO – Innovative Approaches to Acquiring Romanian: *Gamification* Across Language and Professional Contexts

Implemented by a research team from *Transilvania* University of Braşov, Faculty of Letters, at a local level, GIRO was a nationally funded research project focused on integrating *gamification* into language education, having as main objective to enhance motivation and engagement

among students learning Romanian as a FL (RFL) through *gamification*, regarding both productive skills and specialized vocabulary in the areas of engineering, medicine, and sports³⁵. As research framework, it used a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology which allowed for iterative development and refinement of teaching methods based on real-time feedback and adaptation, to create, test, and improve educational designs based on, in this case, *gamification* principles. The study involved 27 international students enrolled in the Preparatory Year at the Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania* University of Braşov, between 19 and 22 years old, comprising 9 girls and 18 boys, who had reached the CEFRL A2 level of Romanian after five months of instruction. Initial data were collected through direct observation and field notes, focusing on identifying motivational issues and engagement levels in the classroom. The digital platform used was ClassDojo for managing gamified elements like points, badges, avatars and interactive feedback, while incorporating various game-based applications and platforms like GooseChase, Storyjumper, Plickers, Wordwall, and Kahoot throughout the teaching experiment to facilitate interactive learning.

The gamified elements were introduced in the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, from late February 2022 until early June 2022. They started from establishing a class environment on ClassDojo, thus allowing students to select their avatars, an initiative which aimed to enhance their initial interaction with the learning experience in an enjoyable and entertaining manner. Afterwards, students engaged in point-based reward systems, earning points for positive actions and facing penalties for lack of involvement or off-task behaviors, such as incomplete homework, limited class participation, or lack of teamwork. The points could be exchanged for badges, with rankings visible on leaderboards updated weekly and accessible through an external platform (www.leaderboardhq.com). Additionally, students engaged in various gamified activities, including online portfolios, poster presentations, and interactive written assignments. The learning experience was designed to maximize student involvement by integrating game design elements like challenges, immediate feedback, and the development of a community through ClassDojo. Students participated actively by engaging in games, contributing to team activities, and using specialized vocabulary in real-world contexts, like field missions, interactive word search, and online book creation. The approach was continuously adjusted based on student feedback and observed interactions, with the educators amending the gamified elements to better suit the students' needs in order to boost their language acquisition process.

2.2.1. GIRO – Peeking into Tomorrowland of *Gamification*

The activities meticulously designed by the GIRO project were meant to ensure that students not only learned Romanian effectively but also enjoyed the process, using *gamification* to

³⁵ Răzvan Săftoiu, Andreea Nechifor, Georgiana Burbea and Ionuț Căpeneată, "Teaching Romanian for Specific Purposes in a Gamified Environment," in *Conference Proceedings. 15th International Conference Innovation in Language Learning*, ed. Pixel (Filodiritto, 2022), 200-206.

enhance motivation and deepen engagement with the language and culture. They incorporated practical language use, teamwork, and technology, enhancing the learning experience through the direct application of language skills in culturally relevant contexts.

Thus, students participated in team activities that required them to carry out missions throughout the city, by engaging in a scavenger hunt using GooseChase, a real-world oriented application which enabled them to practice the specialized language they had learned in a fun, engaging way. Consequently, they completed various challenges around the university campus or local area, one such example task requiring them to locate a specific historical monument in Brasov and take a selfie with it. They then had to describe the monument's historical significance in Romanian, activating vocabulary and expressions they had learned in class. Another such mission invited them to visit specific cultural sites, museums, and landmarks throughout Braşov. At each location, they had to complete tasks such as finding a specific artifact, translating its description into Romanian, and recording a video explanation of its historical significance. This not only required the application of language skills in the field but also deepened their cultural understanding. Last, but not least, students were tasked with finding specific locations in Braşov, such as a car wash or a tire repair shop and use their Romanian language skills to interact within these contexts.

In the same interactional manner, teachers assigned written tasks through ClassDojo, where students were prompted to write short essays or responses based on scenarios they might encounter in Romania. For example, students were asked to write an email to a university professor inquiring about course details or to compose a letter to a friend describing their experiences at a Romanian cultural event. These tasks helped them practice formal and informal writing styles in Romanian. Still on ClassDojo, students were tasked with creating and maintaining an online portfolio, where they compiled all their language projects, including written assignments, videos of spoken language exercises, and peer reviews. This activity required them to regularly update their portfolios with new content, reflect on their progress, and engage in self-assessment. The portfolios were also used for peer feedback sessions where students commented on each other's work, providing constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement.

Quizzes with Kahoot! enabled teachers to conduct real-time puzzles and competitions on topics like Romanian idioms and phrases, engaging students to compete by answering questions on their devices, with instant feedback displayed on the classroom screen. Also, teachers could set up language games that focused specifically on challenging areas of Romanian grammar and syntax. Students competed again to answer questions correctly within a set time limit, with games designed to reinforce understanding of complex grammatical structures through repetitive and varied question formats. Other Kahoot! quizzes presented students with problem-solving scenarios requiring practical use of Romanian. These scenarios included negotiating prices at a market, handling a medical emergency, and making travel arrangements. Each question was designed to prompt critical thinking and application of language in real-life situations, enhancing conversational skills and practical knowledge.

Moreover, Plickers was used to provide immediate feedback on students' answers during class activities. This platform allowed for dynamic assessment where students could see

how well they understood the material in real time, with a dual perspective: online – for instructors, and on-site – for students, via QR codes and result-displays on the spot. Thus, with the help of Plickers, students were divided into groups and each group was assigned a grammar topic to teach to the class. They prepared a brief presentation that explained the grammar rules, followed by Plickers-based quizzes that they had created and which were afterwards administered to their peers, an approach which reinforced their own understanding while encouraging a collaborative learning environment. All these testing activities were designed in a real-time competitive environment to reinforce language acquisition in a lively format, making learning both fun and impactful, helping students solidify their grasp of difficult language rules, and keeping them engaged through *gamification*.

Using Storyjumper, students worked in groups to create an online storybook that incorporated vocabulary from specific thematic units, such as culinary terms, transportation, daily routines, or specialized vocabulary, such as an optical instrument. Each group chose a theme related to Romanian culture or daily life and wrote a short story integrating specific language structures, such as the past tense or the conditional mood. They could illustrate their stories with relevant images and were challenged to narrate them in Romanian, using the newly learned vocabulary in context, thus activating the vocabulary taught in class and culminating in an oral presentation by the team leader. This encouraged creativity and collaborative learning among students, the stories being afterwards shared with classmates in a virtual gallery walk, and even sold online to external parties interested, after peer-students provided feedback based on language use, creativity, and clarity of expressions.

Scaffolding was also activated, as an important constituent part of the gamified approach, students designing and preparing presentations and/or posters in Romanian about their home countries, or on various Romanian cultural topics, such as traditional holidays, famous historical figures, or notable geographical locations, for an internal event. Each student or group researched their topic, created a visually appealing poster/presentation incorporating key vocabulary and language structures, and presented it to the class, with only top performers in this event being given the opportunity to participate in a national conference, further applying their language skills in a broader context, at the next level. The presentations were delivered entirely in Romanian, enhancing both spoken language skills and cultural knowledge.

Students also participated in role-playing exercises where they simulated real-life situations, such as ordering food in a restaurant or asking for directions. Each student played a role, such as a waiter, a customer, or a local resident, using specific vocabulary they had acquired and dialogues they had practiced before. These sessions were recorded, and feedback was provided on pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and interaction quality.

These activities were designed to integrate *gamification* principles into the learning process, making education both effective and enjoyable for students. They combined the use of technology with active, participatory learning strategies that emphasized real-world application, community building, and intrinsic motivation.

2.3. TeachME – Multimedia Pedagogy: The Art and Science of Teaching the Host Country Language

Under the Erasmus+ initiative, TeachME outlined the framework and objectives of a unique educational project, aimed at improving the learning and teaching of less widely spoken European languages through innovative Neurodidactic approaches. Designed to stimulate original educational practices by promoting the learning of minor languages, which are essential for students intending to study or work in countries where these languages are spoken, the project emphasized the integration of Neurodidactic methods into both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments. This integration allowed students to acquire vocabulary, cultural insights, and grammatical structures specific to each host country language, and apply them in real-life communicative contexts.

The project involved a diverse consortium of partners from across Europe, including the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in Germany, the Pelican Foreign Language School in Czechia, Frame NGO in Poland, Prism NGO in Italy, and *Transilvania* University of Braşov in Romania. This transnational collaboration was intended to promote mutual learning and improve educational systems, structures and processes across the participating countries, the primary objectives being to re-consider the brain-based principles of learning to make language acquisition more effective and enjoyable. This included the use of humor, visual representations, and multisensory approaches to engage different learning styles. The project's methodology emphasized practical application through a series of structured and interactive activities designed to cater to various levels of language proficiency, from A1 to B2. The key outcomes consisted of the development of a pathway for international students mapping the preliminary stages in partner countries, the creation of a didactic concept for intensive teaching of a foreign language through multimodal and blended approaches, the design of activities and teaching tools for host country languages in blended and online formats, the preparation of a guide for organizers and coordinators of intensive foreign language courses, and the release of the TeachME platform, which can serve as a comprehensive resource for all project's activities and materials further use and access.

The Handbook created by the linguists,³⁶ based on Moravcová & Maďarová principles,³⁷ shaped the premises for the Guide,³⁸ which explored 72 activities through the lens of

³⁶ "Practical Handbook. A Didactic Concept for Intensive Teaching of a Host-Country Language as a Foreign Language through Multimodal and Blended Learning Approaches," uploaded 2022: https://www.teachmeproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/TeachME-Handbook_full.pdf.

³⁷ Ľudmila Moravcová and Ľudmila Maďarová, "Neurodidactics and its Utilisation in the Field of Language Teaching," in *International Scientific Days 2016. The agri-food value chain: Challenges for natural resources management and society* (The Slovak University of Agriculture, 2016), 634-639.

³⁸ "A Guide to Teaching Foreign Languages from a Neurodidactic Perspective. Activities and Tools for Teaching a Host-Country Language in Blended Learning and Online Courses," uploaded 2023: <https://www.teachmeproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/TeachME-Activities-and-Scripts-final.pdf>

Neurodidactics, each activity being meticulously crafted to engage learners effectively, thus accommodating diverse organizational formats such as whole-class instruction, individual tasks, or collaborative group work. The tasks were designed with a specific purpose in mind, from encouraging critical thinking to reinforcing language skills or promoting creativity and was accompanied by a detailed procedure guiding educators step-by-step through implementation, while the materials ranged from text excerpts to tangible items like paper balls, images, and books, ensuring a dynamic learning environment.

An integrated scenario example was created for every study level, and for each competency. Each scenario was designed for blended learning and consisted of five components – initiation stage (pre-teaching), core stage (teaching), transition stage (post-teaching), assessment, and ensuring transfer – with the core stage being mandatory as a face-to-face event. Additionally, each scenario incorporated one or all the teaching activities presented in the first part, ensuring coherence and ease of navigation throughout the guide.

2.3.1. TeachME – The Next Frontier: A Return to the Basics of Neurodidactics

Targeting all four language skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar aspects, the scripts created by the team of researchers involved in the TeachMe project considered the blended learning approach, thus extending the acquisition medium to an extra-educational setting for an enhanced and more familiar learning experience, minimizing the stress on the digital element, without excluding it altogether, but laying accent on other factors, such as movement, humor, senses, emotions and cognition functions.

Examples of scenarios or scripted activities, such as ‘What can you do there?’, focused on a grammar structure, ‘Packing my suitcase’, suggesting a vocabulary game, or ‘Who tells the truth?’, activating the listening skill, were all envisioned to make language learning more interactive and engaging, utilizing principles of *gamification* and Neurodidactic strategies to enhance student participation and retention.

This first activity was designed to enhance grammar competence in FL acquisition. It began with the teacher providing descriptions and rules related to specific locations such as a supermarket or a train station. The students were tasked with formulating sentences that described allowable, forbidden, or required actions at these locations. One student started by suggesting a sentence, and the rest of the group tried to guess which kind of place was being described. The guessing element of the game helped maintain students’ attention, while connecting the exercise to real-world locations, thus aiding with the long-term retention of the material.

In the second playful vocabulary-building exercise, the class imagined packing items for a vacation. The game started with one student naming an item they would pack in their suitcase, and each subsequent student had to repeat all previously mentioned items and add one more. The challenge continued until a student failed to remember the list, at which point they could either be helped by peers or be out of the game. This activity used the element of surprise and the competitive nature of the game to reinforce memory retention and build vocabulary in a fun, engaging way.

The third listening comprehension activity incorporated elements of *gamification*. Students were divided into groups, and each group participated in a storytelling challenge where they described a picture that only one of them could see. The twist was that one of the storytellers had no picture and had to fabricate a description, attempting to convince the others that they were the ones actually describing a real image. The rest of the class had to listen carefully to determine who was telling the truth and who was making up their story. This exercise emphasized critical listening skills, creativity, and the ability to analyze verbal information.

All these principles and methods were designed to transform the experience of FL learning, making it more dynamic, interactive, and tailored to the cognitive and emotional needs of the learners. These considerations offered educators valuable insights into selecting activities that resonated with their learners' cognitive and emotional needs, ultimately creating a more engaging and impactful learning experience.

3. Discussion. Peering into the Crystal Ball

Consistent with the findings of Nechifor et al.,³⁹ the present study proves that digital tools facilitate a more engaging and accessible learning environment, enhancing both the ease of use and the perceived usefulness of these tools by students. This supports the notion that an enriching digital environment can significantly influence learning outcomes by enhancing student engagement and motivation. Similar studies, mentioned in the Introduction section, such as those by Burbea et al.,⁴⁰ also emphasized the role of *gamification* in boosting learner motivation and participation, which is particularly evident in the use of platforms like ClassDojo and GooseChase. These platforms not only make learning more interactive but also allow for the real-time application of language skills in a fun, competitive manner, sharing, in this way, the general enthusiasm about digital integration seen in Seaman et al.,⁴¹ who highlighted the advantages of digital tools in cultivating real-time communication and collaboration.

Furthermore, the present perspective diverges from the concern related to the risk of reduced interpersonal interactions and the possibility of students becoming excessively focused on gamified rewards rather than the learning outcomes themselves, as it indicates a need for a balanced approach that integrates digital tools without undermining the essential interpersonal aspects of language learning, echoing the concerns raised by Barnlund⁴² regarding the development of communicative competence.

Moreover, the framework suggested by the perspective of this comprehensive educational approach also highlights the positives against the negatives regarding the broad accessibility of digital tools and the disparities in access to technology – especially among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which can exacerbate educational

³⁹ Nechifor et. al., "GIRO," 324-331.

⁴⁰ Burbea et al., "Stimuler la Motivation," 3-20.

⁴¹ Seaman et al., *Grade Increase*.

⁴² Barnlund, "Communicating in a Global Village," 4-14.

inequalities, as seen by Warschauer.⁴³ This disparity, once put into perspective, suggests that while digital tools are effective, they must be deployed thoughtfully to ensure they do not widen existing gaps in educational opportunities. In this way, a blended approach, as suggested by the TechMe project, with a return to the basics of Neurodidactics, but without completely dismissing the digital component, can support the digital tools' promise of inclusivity, with a minimum of digital exposure or a CALL, MALL, TELL or WALL approach to FL acquisition, as suggested by the LanGuide project, combined with a wise reintegration of a natural approach to teaching.

Additionally, the study's emphasis on cultural elements within digital language education reflects a growing recognition of the importance of cultural literacy in language learning, which is echoed by similar studies like those by Nechifor and Borca.⁴⁴ These researchers highlighted the importance of *culturacy*, while Nechifor and Dimulescu⁴⁵ emphasized the potential for digital tools to incorporate cultural nuances that enhance language learning by providing context and real-world applicability. For instance, the use of real-life scenarios and culturally relevant tasks in apps like GooseChase and ClassDojo not only helps in the acquisition of language but also deepens the learner's cultural insight, an aspect critically important in today's globalized educational context.

Comparatively, Zawacki-Richter et al.⁴⁶ noted the potential for digital tools to offer dynamic and adaptable learning experiences that are accessible across different devices. However, the perspective put forward by the present study extends the notion by specifically integrating cultural components that address local customs, traditions, and everyday life, which are often missing in broader educational technology-related discussions. This approach aligns with the findings of Seaman et al.,⁴⁷ who advocated for the inclusion of cultural elements to enhance the relevance and engagement of online learning environments.

Looking ahead, future research should explore strategies to mitigate the drawbacks of digitalization in language learning. For instance, integrating AI and advanced analytics could provide personalized learning experiences while maintaining the essential human element in education. Further studies could also examine the long-term impacts of *gamification* on language retention and real-world application skills.

4. Conclusion and Limitations

In conclusion, while the benefits of digital tools in language education are clear, the present vision underlines the importance of addressing the challenges to proficiently control these technologies for equitable and effective language learning. As the complexities introduced by digitalization continue to be discovered, it remains crucial to redesign an educational

⁴³ Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion*.

⁴⁴ Nechifor and Borca, "Contextualising Culture," 287–304.

⁴⁵ Nechifor and Dimulescu, "Integrating Culture," 83–100.

⁴⁶ Zawacki-Richter et al., "Systematic Review," 1–30.

⁴⁷ Seaman et al., *Grade Increase*.

environment that not only embraces technological advancements but also preserves the richness of direct, culturally nuanced communication and learning.

Thus, by building upon the traditional Speech Acts Theory within Linguistics Pragmatics, which assigns an assertive force to the utterances generated, a fresh outlook emerges in the digital realm of education known as *Digital Pragmatics*. This perspective, exemplified by the LanGuide experts, for instance, ensures that words are tailored to suit the digital environment effectively, therefore making the words fit the world of digitalization. Embodying a comprehensive approach to developing a mobile-assisted language learning application that not only focuses on language proficiency but also deeply integrates cultural elements into the learning process, the LanGuide approach ensured that the learners are not just linguistically prepared but also culturally informed, which is particularly beneficial for those engaging in international and multicultural environments. Subsequently, the LanGuide Mobile App provides an open access mobile tool for users who wish to pursue flexible learning pathways in line with their own needs and learning styles in their effort to study new languages or upgrade knowledge of previously acquired languages. The LanGuide digital technology and mobile app enable users to test their FL skills and to further develop them with no time limitations and completely free of charge. All one needs to do is register and take advantage of a bank of 1825 exercises available, the limitations of this database consisting only in the formats of the exercises implemented through and supported by the CMP, which restricted the creativity of the language specialists to a reduced typology of designs for the tasks.

Similarly, according to Nechifor et al.⁴⁸ and Burbea et al.,⁴⁹ the implementation of *gamification* methods by GIRO led to increased student engagement and motivation. The use of a points-badges-leaderboard (PBL) system helped in making the learning process less boring, more dynamic and interactive, which encouraged students to participate more actively and consistently. The experiment noted improvements in building a community feeling among students, as *gamification* helped in celebrating accomplishments and encouraged collaboration. The approach was beneficial not just for extrinsic motivation through rewards but also boosted intrinsic motivation by making learning enjoyable and integrated with real-life experiences. Some challenges included the risk of students focusing too much on earning points rather than learning outcomes, which was addressed by varying the teaching methods and not relying solely on *gamification*, as well as the reduced size of the experiment group. By integrating game design elements into the learning process, the project helped promote a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment, which supported the students in achieving higher levels of language proficiency and engagement, which could have been even more enhanced if limitations had not been imposed by the paid versions of the digital platforms, these one offering more generous gamified customized items in their plans.

Likewise, implementing Neurodidactic techniques in FL acquisition encompasses a variety of methods and principles based on the latest research in Neuroscience and Didactics, as

⁴⁸ Nechifor et al., "GIRO," 324-331.

⁴⁹ Burbea et al., "Stimuler la Motivation," 3-20.

learning is influenced by the structure and functions of the brain, including memory and emotional processing. Thus, key elements include the use of positive emotions and motivation to facilitate retention and application of knowledge, multimodal and blended approaches being essential for effective teaching, encouraging interaction and practical application of the language in diverse contexts. The methods and didactic techniques include role-playing and collaborative exercises, stimulating engagement and active participation of learners, the teaching approach being tailored to the individual needs of learners, by observing various learning styles. Among the factors that promote learning could be considered humor, movement, and the use of visual materials and games to enhance learners' attention and interest. As the impact of emotions and motivation on learning emphasizes the importance of creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom and a constructive relationship between teacher and learners, to further improve learning outcomes, the assessment and feedback put forward assessment methods that allow learners to reflect on their progress and receive constructive feedback, thus facilitating deep and lasting learning.

In this way, the present study represents a comprehensive effort to enhance language education through innovative digital methods, developing an environment that promotes not only language learning but also cultural integration and educational exchange within a *globalized* frame.

5. Recommendation and Future Directions

The return of the language instructors, with their role redefined, can mark a fresh start, piloting a new era characterised by the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and teaching. While AI cannot fully replace the teachers, their role must undergo redefinition to accommodate technological advancements. Similarly, AI does not equate to traditional educational manuals, but educational materials must evolve to align with AI capabilities and students' needs. Furthermore, AI does not simply replicate the conventional educational setting, but the environment needs to be enlarged. Acknowledging AI as a tool, educators must upgrade pedagogical methodologies, practices, and approaches to ensure a smooth integration of this technology. In this context, the ELITE-AI project emerges as a newly designed Erasmus+ initiative recently validated and fully funded. The project advocates for the integration of AI tools into FL classes, particularly emphasizing English for Specific Purposes (ESP), encompassing all three crucial facets of the instructional process: teaching, learning, and assessment. It also caters to all four language skills through a specialized repository of materials and targeted tasks, and it is primarily focused on critical academic dimensions such as quality control and ethical considerations.⁵⁰

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