

The Role of Student-Centered Approaches in the Success of Mini-Immersion Activities

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This article describes a “Job Fair” session, designed for Russian Basic Course students at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). This immersion-based activity emphasizes the importance of a student-centered approach in crafting motivational teaching resources. The 6-hour activity plan includes interactive learning exercises, homework assignments, and a mini-immersion scenario that actively engages students, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural codes and vocabulary learning.

Keywords: *Student-Centered Approach, Immersion*

INTRODUCTION

The field of foreign language education is based on research in psychology and learning and therefore requires a continuous re-evaluation of pedagogical approaches. Previous understandings of a student’s role as being a passive recipient, with class time being dominated by teachers lecturing, has inverted. More recent models have given rise to a paradigm in which students assume a more active role in their learning, and teachers adopt the roles of facilitator and coach as they continue to structure learning experiences for their students. This shift has resulted in positive changes in the educational process in general (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, a fundamental question remains for foreign language instructors who are constantly developing activities for their students: *How can an educational activity be designed to comprehensively address the most complex challenges for students with different language learning needs?* These challenges include maintaining a student-centric approach, fostering inspiration and motivation, and integrating cultural elements within a classroom setting, while maintaining a focus on language learning objectives. *Immersion-based learning activities* provide one way to address these challenges and are the topic for this paper.

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Immersion-Based Activities: Benefits and Challenges

In the context of educational processes at DLIFLC, considering the intensive pace of studies and a general lack of time to fully engage with all program elements, periodic immersion-based learning activities can be an effective approach for several reasons. First, such activities provide a context-rich environment in which students are exposed to the language in real-life situations while still in the classroom. This exposure can help students better learn and practice vocabulary. Second, well-developed, highly motivating activities offer students practical insights into their learning. Third, immersion-based activities include exposure to the target culture associated with the language, which is crucial for successfully passing the final tests and for job performance. Additionally, it aligns with the paradigm of target language communication and the student-centered approach promoted at the Institute, thereby enhancing speaking, listening, and overall communication skills. Finally, immersion requires students to adapt to various situations and contexts, enhancing their ability to use the language flexibly and effectively. Even short-term immersion programs benefit students; the U.S. Department of Defense, in fact, found that short-term foreign language immersion programs “stimulate language and cultural learning” and benefit students’ listening and reading (Savage & Hughes, 2014).

Immersive activities, however, can be challenging to plan and execute. True immersion situations where students travel to a region that is largely populated by speakers of the target language are expensive and complicated for any educational institution; fortunately, less-complicated and costly versions of immersions can be carried out closer to home. The term “mini-immersion” is used at DLIFLC to refer to tasks where teachers set up scenarios at different stations for students to interact with peers and teachers in the target language. These mini-immersions occur during class time, over two to three class periods. It can be challenging, however, to create activities that are interesting and that are feasible during the time allotted; the activities must also be connected to the student learning objectives/curriculum and must be at the appropriate proficiency level. Teachers and students alike must be prepared for the activities and must have a clear understanding of what will occur. Yet these challenges can be overcome with careful planning. This article will give an example of a mini-immersion activity that can be adapted and used in any language at DLIFLC. This article will also discuss challenges we faced and how we overcame them, along with lessons learned.

SCENARIO DESCRIPTION

Mini-Immersion Session Context

The project “Ярмарка вакансий” (*Job Fair*) serves as the final assignment for Lessons 39–41 within Module VII of the Basic Russian Course, scheduled for week 31 or 32 of the curriculum (out of a 48-week course). Students are therefore expected to be at approximately Level 1+ or 2 on the ILR scale. This mini-immersion session requires students to apply the vocabulary and linguistic structures learned throughout the module, with a focus on the themes of education and job-seeking. The primary linguistic objective is to enhance students’ proficiency in using job-

related vocabulary. Culturally, the session introduces students to Russian professional etiquette expectations and processes.

Prior to the Immersion Session

Adequate preparation and planning are crucial for a successful mini-immersion event. Before the day of the mini-immersion, students are assigned a 2-hour preparatory homework task related to job fairs. The homework includes various activities, the primary objectives of which are to activate students' schemata, provide cultural insights into the Russian approach to job fairs, and stimulate the application of required vocabulary, grammar structures, and discourse.

The day of the main activity begins with a feedback session on the aforementioned pre-immersion homework. The feedback process is interactive, with students initially assisting each other, and the teacher intervening when necessary, adopting the role of an observer rather than an active participant.

The students are then given another 50 minutes to prepare for the immersion activity by formulating interview questions (for those playing the role of employers) and listing the characteristics of an ideal candidate and prior work experiences (for those acting as job seekers).

During the Immersion Session

Group Division

The class is divided into two equal groups, each group consisting of five students in our example. One group undertakes the role of employers, while the other acts as job seekers. The criteria for group selection can be determined based on the group and the instructors. In our case, we assigned the students with lower language proficiency to the role of job seekers, while the students with higher proficiency assumed the role of employers. This approach facilitated more effective communication within the groups, as students were able to assist one another.

Main Objectives

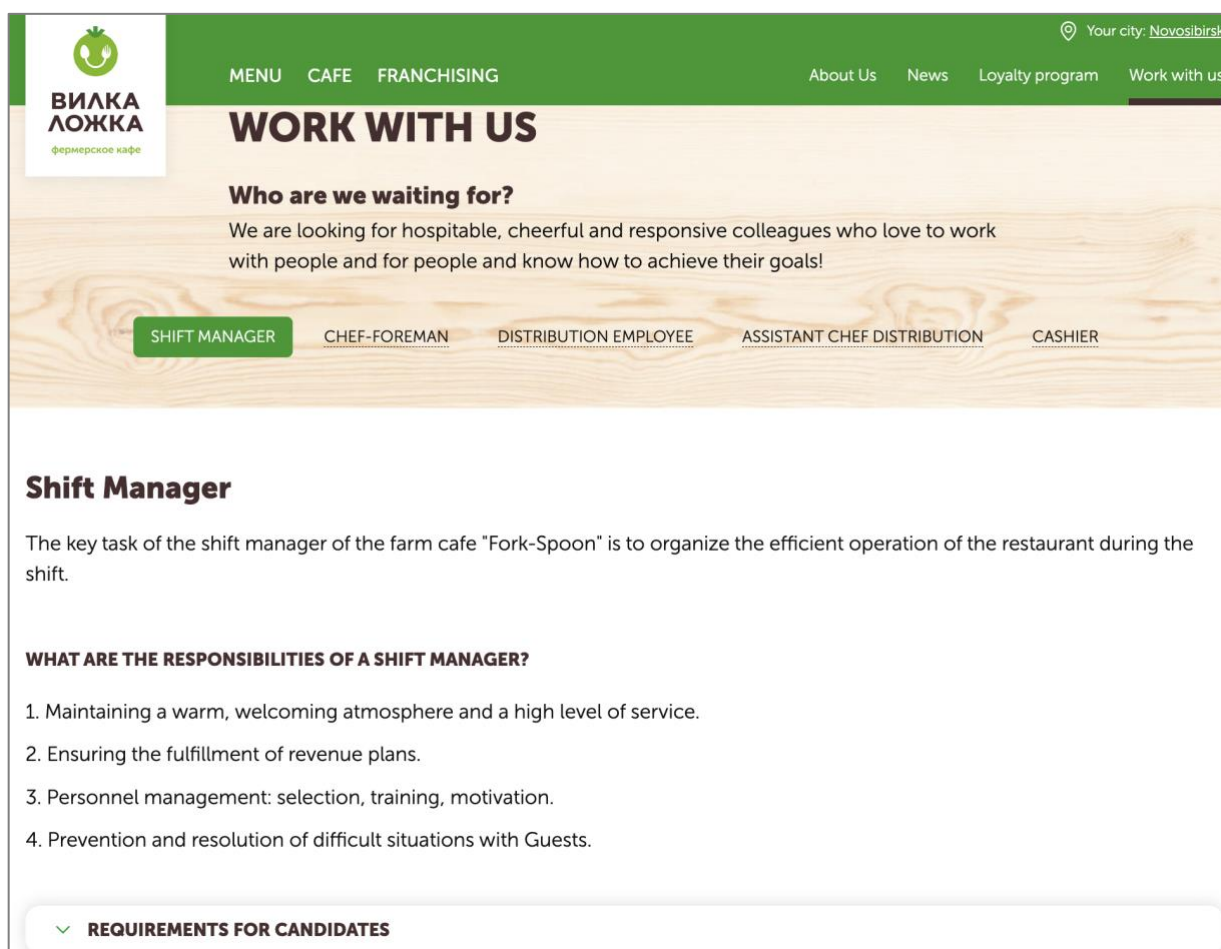
The primary objective for "employers" is to successfully identify at least one suitable candidate for the job vacancies in their institution. Simultaneously, the "job seekers" aim to secure a position in at least one of the companies represented at the job fair. It is important to highlight that if learners are uncertain about their tasks and how the mini-immersion contributes to their learning, its effectiveness may decline. Therefore, establishing clear objectives supported by the teacher's enthusiasm and accompanied by printed instructions is essential for fostering student confidence and mitigating negative emotions.

Activity Setting

The students are told that the activity is set in a Russian city where a job fair is taking place. They are given a list of companies that are present at the job fair. The companies chosen by the teachers for this job fair should have websites with job openings in the target language and should be at the desired proficiency level for the student population; the types of companies should also be aligned with the curriculum in terms of topics and vocabulary. Companies can be restaurants, car dealerships, universities, medical facilities, etc. During the mini-immersion activity, each “employer” represents one company and has a room for the interview. The interview process for each candidate is observed by one instructor.

Figure 1 demonstrates a website used in this example, but for the purposes of the article is translated into English. Note that the level of the language is not complicated, that it is an appealing and easy-to-read website, and that the responsibilities are clearly listed. These are the types of job sites that we found to be most appropriate for this mini-immersion activity.

Figure 1
Example of a Job Website for the Job Fair Mini-Immersion



Source: <https://vilka-lozhka.com/jobs/>

Assignment of Employers

As part of their pre-immersion preparation, students who will play the role of the employers will formulate a set of interview questions after they explore their company site to review the current openings. The instructor then provides them with a list of three job vacancies, including positions for highly qualified specialists and unskilled workers, each with specific job requirements. For example, if one of the scenarios is for a clinic that needs a nurse, the requirements such as nursing education and/or experience, strong communication skills, and the capacity to work flexible hours (nights and weekends) might be specified. Using these descriptions, employers are responsible for formulating a set of interview questions for potential candidates, for example:

- *У вас есть медицинское образование?*
Do you have a nursing education?
- *Сколько лет опыта работы по специальности вы имеете?*
How many years of relevant experience do you have?
- *Приведите пример проблемной ситуации, которую вам пришлось решать на предыдущем месте работы, и как вы ее решили?*
Can you provide an example of a challenging situation you faced during your previous experience and how you handled it?
- *Можете ли вы работать по гибкому графику, включая ночные дежурства и выходные?*
Are you willing to work flexible hours, including nights and weekends?
- *Почему вы хотите работать в Новосибирской клинической больнице?*
Why are you interested in working at our hospital?

During the interview, employers take notes to provide their reasoning for selecting a candidate and to justify their choice based on the candidate's qualifications for the job requirements. The template for these notes is developed by the instructor in advance. It includes the following categories: name of the candidate, education, experience, constraints to work, strengths, and weaknesses. As employers have openings for both highly qualified and unskilled workers, they can adjust their offers during the interview based on the qualifications of the job seekers.

Assignment of Job Seekers

The students who will play the role of job seekers will create imaginary profiles for ideal candidates suitable for potential job openings in the five represented companies, after familiarizing themselves with the company names and information from their websites.

During the interview, the job seekers must be able to describe the strengths and positive characteristics of their ideal candidate, be ready to discuss their prior work experiences, and respond to questions of the potential employers. In addition to answering questions, job seekers

should be able to ask questions to potential employers about the company requirements, job responsibilities, and work conditions.

Post-Immersion Session

After conducting interviews, employers and job seekers gather in the conference room. The employers present job offers to the most suitable candidates, underlining their selection criteria. The job seekers then assess the offers and choose the most fitting company, explaining their decision. Naturally, all conversations for the entire activity take place in the target language, with support from the teachers as needed.

CHALLENGES

During our first immersion session, we did not encounter major challenges, only minor issues that can be easily addressed in future sessions. These challenges can be summarized as follows:

1. **Time management.** Initially, we allocated 10 minutes per job seeker across five groups of students. However, the interviews often exceeded this timeframe due to the students' high level of engagement. Thus, instructors may want to consider scheduling two periods for the role-play portion of the immersion session to have enough time for the interviews and the following job offer discussions.
2. **Resource allocation.** With more than four groups of students, there might be an insufficient number of rooms and instructors to observe the interview process. A practical solution would be to use a single large room with stations corresponding to the number of student groups, like a real-life job fair, where the companies share the same space. This setup would minimize the need for more than three instructors and better simulate a real-life scenario.
3. **Instructions for job seekers.** Job seekers must have clear instructions to engage their imagination during the process. Creativity is key to successfully securing a job. For example, one student during our session invented various life stories to match different companies (e.g., *a mother of five children seeking any job in a hospital or an experienced car dealer with strong recommendations*). Such adaptability resulted in three job offers from different companies, with employers even offering bonuses to this job seeker during the final discussion. It also resulted in more realistic language use and increased vocabulary retention.
4. **Interview process.** One potential concern could be the repetitiveness of employers' questions of job seekers. However, this concern proved to be unfounded in our situation as students were deeply immersed in their roles, with dynamic and engaging interactions. Each employer managed to adjust their questions based on responses, contributing to a realistic and engaging scenario.
5. **Inclusive job offers.** To maintain motivation for all students, it seemed beneficial to ensure that the last employer offer one position to the job seeker who had not yet received an offer if there were any. This practice could provide every student with the opportunity to receive a positive outcome at the end of the mini-immersion. While we did not anticipate this

scenario, our last presenter intuitively made a considerate gesture by offering a position to the student who had not received any other offers, thereby maintaining satisfaction among all participants.

CONCLUSION

Our mini-immersion program "Ярмарка вакансий" demonstrated the practical benefits of such activities, highlighting the effectiveness of a student-centered approach to language learning. It provided students with a unique opportunity to apply their language skills in authentic professional settings, resulting in positive feedback. Students found the experience both challenging and engaging, with their largest concern being the time and complexity of the homework assignment. However, they affirmed that after thorough review, feedback, and explanations from instructors, they realized their concerns were unfounded. The autonomy during the session, where the teacher assumed a role as an observer and coach when needed, was particularly appreciated by the students. This approach was instrumental in fostering a greater sense of responsibility among the students, leading to their full engagement in the process. These types of mini-immersion activities can be conducted in any language and at any point in the curriculum. Careful planning and student preparation are the keys to success.

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