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Outdoor Education and Emotions in Second Language Learning

Edukacja outdoorowa a emocje w nauce drugiego języka

KEYWORDS

foreign language anxiety, foreign language enjoyment, flow, outdoor education, positive psychology in SLA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines outdoor language learning as an emotionally complex and pedagogically conditional environment for second and foreign language education. It argues that learning beyond the classroom should not be understood merely as a spatial relocation of instruction, but as a didactic situation shaped by the interaction between task design, learner readiness, spatial context, social exposure, and communicative safety. Drawing on experiential pedagogy, place-based education, environmental psychology, research on emotions in second language acquisition, flow theory, and task-based language teaching, the paper discusses the potential of field-based communicative tasks to support lexical, pragmatic, interactional, cultural, social, and mediation competences. At the same time, it emphasizes that outdoor learning environments are not inherently positive or motivating for all learners. Natural and social spaces may foster curiosity, agency, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate, but they may also generate anxiety, discomfort, uncertainty, or avoidance.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

lęk językowy,
przyjemność z nauki
języka obcego, *flow*,
outdoor education,
psychologia
pozytywna

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje outdoorowe uczenie się języka, emocjonalnie złożone i pedagogicznie warunkowe środowisko edukacji w zakresie języka drugiego i obcego. Główna teza zakłada, że uczenia się poza klasą nie należy rozumieć wyłącznie jako przestrzennego przeniesienia procesu nauczania, lecz jako sytuację dydaktyczną kształtowaną przez wzajemne oddziaływanie projektu zadania, gotowości uczącego się, kontekstu przestrzennego, ekspozycji społecznej oraz bezpieczeństwa komunikacyjnego. Odwołując się do pedagogiki doświadczenia oraz miejsca, psychologii środowiskowej, badań nad emocjami w przyswajaniu języka drugiego, teorii przepływu oraz zadaniowego nauczania języka, artykuł omawia potencjał terenowych zadań komunikacyjnych w zakresie wspierania kompetencji leksykalnych, pragmatycznych, interakcyjnych, kulturowych, społecznych i mediacyjnych. Jednocześnie podkreśla, że środowiska outdoorowego uczenia się nie są z natury pozytywne ani motywujące dla wszystkich uczących się. Przestrzenie naturalne i społeczne mogą sprzyjać ciekawości, sprawczości, przyjemności oraz gotowości do komunikowania się, ale mogą również generować lęk, dyskomfort, niepewność lub zachowania unikowe.

Introduction

Language learning beyond the classroom should not be conceptualized as a merely incidental enrichment of traditional instruction, but rather as a complex didactic phenomenon situated at the intersection of experiential pedagogy, outdoor education, place-based education, environmental psychology, research on emotions in second language acquisition, and contemporary language pedagogy. Extra-classroom spaces, whether natural, urban, institutional, school-based, or local, may constitute learning environments in which language functions not only as an object of metalinguistic reflection, but above all as an instrument of social action.

This paper argues that outdoor language learning should be understood not merely as a change of location, but as an emotionally and socially complex pedagogical environment whose effectiveness depends on the relationship between the learner, the task, the place, the group, and the teacher. In this sense, outdoor language learning refers to the planned use of extra-classroom environments for communicative, task-based, and reflective language learning activities. Such activities may take place in natural settings, urban spaces, cultural institutions, local communities, school grounds, museums, libraries, shops, or other public spaces in which language can be used for meaningful social purposes.

Outdoor Education, Experience, and Place-Based Learning

The theoretical foundations of outdoor education may be traced to John Dewey's *pedagogy of experience*, according to which learning occurs most fully when individuals actively participate in meaningful situations, confront problems, act upon them, experience the consequences of their own activity, and subsequently subject that experience to reflection (Dewey, 1938). A similar logic is developed in David Kolb's theory of experiential learning, in which learning is understood as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

A second important theoretical context is provided by *place-based education*. Within this approach, the local environment is treated as a point of departure for interdisciplinary, social, cultural, and civic learning. Smith (2002) argues that place-based education may involve the study of local culture, nature, history, social issues, and community practices, thereby enabling students to learn through the anchoring of educational content in the concrete environment of everyday life. Sobel (2004), in turn, emphasizes that connecting the school with the local community fosters responsibility, agency, and a sense of belonging.

Research on outdoor education indicates that its effects should be examined multidimensionally: cognitively, emotionally, motivationally, socially, health-relatedly, and axiologically. Rickinson et al. (2004), in an extensive review of research on outdoor learning, showed that well-designed activities beyond the classroom may support subject knowledge, conceptual understanding, attitudes toward the environment, personal development, and students' social competences. Dillon et al. (2006) emphasize, however, that the effectiveness of such activities does not automatically result from leaving the classroom. Rather, it depends on the quality of the designed experience, students' preparation, the appropriateness of tasks, the manner in which the activity is conducted, and reflective closure after returning to the classroom. Similar conclusions emerge from the systematic review by Becker et al. (2017), which concerns regular classes conducted in outdoor education settings. The authors indicate that education beyond the classroom may support learning, social relationships, physical activity, and students' health, while also noting the heterogeneous methodological quality of the available studies. More recent reviews further strengthen the argument concerning the potential of outdoor education for the holistic development of children and adolescents. Mann et al. (2022), analyzing nature-specific outdoor learning, identify socio-emotional, academic, and well-being-related benefits, including increased engagement, cooperation, agency, elements of improved academic achievement, and the strengthening of self-concept. Ly & Vella-Brodrick (2024), in a review of school-led

greenspace interventions, state that contact with nature in school contexts may support the psychological, physical, and social well-being of children and adolescents, particularly in relation to positive affect, physical activity, and social relationships.

Natural and Social Spaces as Emotionally Ambivalent Learning Environments

The significance of the natural environment for learning is frequently explained through theories of *environmental psychology*. *Attention Restoration Theory* assumes that natural environments may support the restoration of cognitive resources, especially directed attention, which is often heavily taxed in school settings (Kaplan, 1995). Stress Reduction Theory, in turn, suggests that contact with elements of nature may reduce psychophysiological tension and create more favorable conditions for emotional regulation and cognitive functioning (Ulrich et al., 1991). In the meta-review by Lomax et al. (2024), contact with nature is presented as potentially beneficial for the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents, although the authors emphasize the limitations of the current evidence base and the need for further research.

Such a position is particularly relevant for designing research on outdoor language learning: the positive impact of natural space should be treated as a possible outcome rather than as an initial assumption. This is especially important when referring to the theory of biophilia. Wilson (1984) understood biophilia as a human tendency to direct attention toward life and life processes and to seek contact with other forms of life. Later developments of this perspective emphasize that the human bond with nature may have cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, developmental, and axiological significance (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). The concept of biophilia provides an important justification for environmental and outdoor education because it enables contact with nature to be interpreted as potentially supporting curiosity, attention, well-being, and engagement. This does not mean, however, that contact with nature has an unequivocally positive emotional valence for all students. Ulrich (1993), writing about biophilia, biophobia, and natural landscapes, pointed out that human responses to nature include not only fascination, preference, and attraction, but also fear, avoidance, and negative reactions to stimuli perceived as threatening.

For this reason, analyses of outdoor education should also take into account the phenomenon of biophobia, understood as fear, reluctance, disgust, or aversion toward elements of nature such as insects, spiders, snakes, wild animals, plants, mud, darkness, humidity, forests, or the unpredictability of the natural environment. Bixler et al. (1994) showed that during field trips students may display numerous fear reactions and forms of discomfort associated with contact with wild nature.

Bixler & Floyd (1997), in turn, demonstrated that anticipated fear, disgust sensitivity, and attachment to modern comforts may be associated with a lower preference for wild environments and outdoor activities. More recent approaches to biophobia likewise emphasize that aversive reactions toward nature may concern various organisms and environments and may influence the avoidance of contact with nature (Soga & Evans, 2024).

Responses to the natural environment are shaped by previous experiences, place of residence, degree of urbanization, family patterns, cultural practices, media exposure, individual emotional sensitivity, and prior exposure to nature. Zhang et al. (2014) indicate that more frequent contact between children and nature may be associated with higher levels of biophilia and lower levels of biophobia, which suggests that a lack of prior nature-related experience may intensify distance, uncertainty, or fear. In the school context, this means that students do not enter outdoor situations with the same level of emotional readiness. Analogous caution is necessary with regard to activities carried out not in nature, but in social spaces such as shops, libraries, museums, offices, cultural institutions, service points, city streets, or public transport. Such places may increase the authenticity of language tasks because they enable language use in real communicative situations. Nevertheless, they do not automatically foster positive emotions. For some students, contact with an unfamiliar adult, the need to ask a question, the risk of not understanding an answer, time pressure, noise, crowds, unfamiliar institutional norms, or fear of making a mistake may intensify communicative anxiety. This is particularly relevant for students learning a second or foreign language, who may simultaneously experience linguistic, cultural, and social uncertainty.

Emotions in Second Language Acquisition

One of the earliest and most influential theoretical frameworks to incorporate the emotional factor was Stephen Krashen's *affective filter hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem influence the extent to which learners are able to make effective use of available linguistic input (Krashen, 1982). Comprehensible input does not automatically lead to acquisition if the learner functions under conditions of high tension, low self-esteem, or reduced motivation. A high affective filter may restrict the access of linguistic stimuli to acquisition mechanisms, whereas a low affective filter fosters greater openness to language contact. The subsequent development of research on the affective dimension of language education has led to a more complex understanding of emotions. Particularly significant in this respect has been research on language anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) described foreign

language classroom anxiety as a specific type of situational anxiety associated with using a foreign language in classroom conditions. This anxiety includes communicative tension, fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, and uncertainty regarding one's own competence. Unlike general shyness or social anxiety, language anxiety is strongly connected with situations in which students must express themselves in a code over which they do not have full control. It is therefore both linguistic and social in nature.

More recent research has brought about a significant shift in perspective. Under the influence of positive psychology, emotions have begun to be perceived not only as factors that inhibit learning, but also as resources supporting language development. Positive psychology in second language research draws attention to phenomena such as hope, well-being, curiosity, interest, resilience, satisfaction, a sense of meaning, social relationships, and enjoyment of language use (MacIntyre et al., 2016). From this perspective, positive emotions are not merely an addition to the didactic process, but may influence attention, readiness to take communicative risks, perseverance in tasks, and the ability to interpret difficulties as challenges rather than solely as threats. This line of research is also consistent with Barbara Fredrickson's *broaden-and-build theory*, according to which positive emotions broaden the repertoire of thought and action and foster the development of long-term cognitive, social, and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). A particularly important development in research on language-related emotions has been the distinction between *foreign language classroom anxiety* and *foreign language enjoyment*, understood as pleasure or satisfaction derived from learning and using a language. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) showed that language anxiety and language learning enjoyment are not simple opposites on a single affective axis, but partially independent constructs. This means that a learner may simultaneously experience tension and satisfaction, fear of error and interest in the task, uncertainty and pleasure resulting from participation in interaction.

Flow, Willingness to Communicate, and Field-Based Language Use

One of the most useful perspectives for interpreting positive emotional engagement is the theory of *flow*, developed by Csíkszentmihályi (1990). Flow refers to a state of deep involvement in an activity, intense concentration, a sense of control, coherence of action, and intrinsic motivation, in which the activity itself becomes a source of satisfaction. The condition for the emergence of this state is a relative balance between the level of task difficulty and the individual's perceived competences. When a task is too easy, it may lead to boredom; when it is too difficult, it may

evoke anxiety, frustration, or withdrawal. In language education, the concept of flow is particularly significant because it enables the description of situations in which students engage in communication not because of external compulsion, but because the task is meaningful, interesting, and feasible. Egbert (2003) indicated that flow in the language classroom may occur especially when tasks are authentic, have a clear goal, allow learners a certain degree of autonomy, provide feedback, and are not dominated by immediate error correction. From a pedagogical point of view, well-designed language tasks may therefore support not only the development of communicative competence, but also optimal emotional experiences.

The perspective of flow is particularly useful in analyzing outdoor activities. Tasks carried out beyond the classroom often contain elements conducive to engagement: movement, space, cooperation, a real goal, a problem to solve, a tangible outcome, and immediate feedback from the environment. Students may use language in order to ask for directions, find information, describe an object, interpret a message, cooperate with a group, conduct an interview, or complete a task in urban or natural space. In such situations, language ceases to be an abstract object of school practice and becomes a tool for action. This does not mean, however, that every outdoor task will automatically produce flow. The conditions include appropriate task difficulty, clarity of instructions, linguistic preparation, a sense of safety, and the possibility of acting at a level consistent with the learner's competences. From the perspective of willingness to communicate, field-based activities may also play an important role because they create situations in which speaking results from the need to complete a task. MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualize willingness to communicate as a phenomenon dependent on both individual and situational factors. A learner may be more willing to use the language when the task is understandable, the addressee is real, the risk of error is acceptable, and the communicative goal is clear. More recent dynamic and ecological perspectives on willingness to communicate further emphasize the role of context, social relationships, learner agency, and perceived communicative ability (Peng, 2022).

When interpreting the possible emotional and motivational effects of outdoor activities, it is also useful to refer to Dörnyei's L2 *Motivational Self System*. In this perspective, motivation to learn a second language is connected, among other things, with an imagined image of oneself as a future language user, social expectations, and the current learning experience (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Positive experiences associated with using language in real and meaningful situations may strengthen students' perception of themselves as individuals capable of communicating in a second language. Conversely, experiences that are highly stressful, humiliating, or exceed the learner's current resources may reinforce avoidance of communication and a negative self-image as a language user. From this perspective, outdoor activities require a design that combines authenticity with psychological safety.

Communicative Tasks Beyond the Classroom

Outdoor education connects directly with language pedagogy when learning beyond the classroom is situated within task-based, action-oriented, and environmental approaches. In this understanding, language is not treated solely as a system of lexical and grammatical structures, but as a tool for achieving social goals. This perspective is consistent with the action-oriented approach developed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in which the language user is understood as a social actor performing tasks in a specific social and cultural context (Council of Europe, 2020). Field-based activities may therefore constitute an important extension of classroom teaching. They enable students to move from controlled practice of language forms to language use in situations of action, interaction, mediation, and social participation. Communicative tasks carried out beyond the classroom should have a clearly defined goal, a recognizable social context, specified participant roles, and an outcome that can be observed or presented. In this sense, they are consistent with the assumptions of task-based language teaching, according to which the basic unit of organizing the didactic process is a task requiring the use of language to achieve an extralinguistic goal, rather than merely reproducing a particular grammatical structure (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007).

In outdoor and public spaces, such activities may include orientation, transactional, informational, project-based, and mediation tasks: asking for directions, reading information boards, interpreting regulations, buying a ticket, ordering food, collecting information in a library or museum, conducting a short interview, preparing a linguistic map of the neighborhood, developing a guide for new students, or creating an urban game in the target language. A particularly important group of activities consists of tasks based on observing the linguistic landscape. The analysis of signs, announcements, regulations, boards, pictograms, names of institutions, and public messages allows students to notice that language functions in social space as a carrier of information, norms, values, relationships, and cultural practices. Cenoz & Gorter (2008) indicate that the linguistic landscape may constitute an additional source of input in the process of second language acquisition because messages present in public space are authentic, contextually embedded, and pragmatically marked.

At the same time, communicative tasks beyond the classroom should not be idealized. Students may evaluate language use in outdoor space as more authentic, functional, and engaging than classroom exercises because language becomes connected with action, movement, place, and a real addressee. They may experience greater agency because communication serves to solve a problem, obtain information, follow instructions, or cooperate with others. However, the same situation may evoke tension, embarrassment, uncertainty, or a sense of social exposure in other students.

A task involving conducting an interview, asking for directions, or speaking with an institutional employee may be a source of satisfaction for one learner and an overly burdensome situation for another. Therefore, the emotional reception of field-based activities should be the object of research, not an assumption derived from the mere form of the activity. Empirical confirmation of this cautious position can be found in the study by Myhre et al. (2023), which examined anxiety and enjoyment among young adolescents learning English as a foreign language in outdoor conditions. The authors analyzed whether using English outdoors could reduce *foreign language anxiety*, strengthen *foreign language enjoyment*, and increase willingness to communicate. The results indicated that students evaluated the outdoor experience positively, but the quantitative differences between the experimental and control groups were not unequivocally strong. This study shows that outdoor language learning has significant qualitative potential, but its influence on emotions, motivation, and willingness to communicate requires empirical investigation rather than a priori assumptions.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Field-based communicative activities appear particularly valuable for the development of lexical, pragmatic, interactional, cultural, social, and mediation competences. Lexical competence develops through contact with vocabulary embedded in place and action, such as names of institutions, services, objects, directions, messages, rules, and procedures. Pragmatic competence is supported through the observation and use of politeness formulas, requests, questions, expressions of thanks, apologies, instructions, warnings, and prohibitions. Interactional competence develops through the need to respond to other people's utterances, ask follow-up questions, paraphrase, request repetition, and negotiate meaning. Cultural competence involves understanding behavioral norms, communicative conventions, symbols, institutions, and social practices present in a given environment. Mediation competence becomes visible when learners explain messages to others, summarize information, simplify utterances, help peers understand instructions, or mediate between different levels of language competence.

At the same time, outdoor language learning requires pedagogical caution. Learners differ in their previous experiences, level of linguistic competence, emotional readiness, attitude toward nature, comfort in public spaces, and sensitivity to social exposure. A task that one learner experiences as authentic and motivating may be perceived by another as stressful, unpredictable, or emotionally demanding. For this reason, field-based communicative tasks should be designed in ways that combine authenticity with psychological safety. Outdoor tasks should be introduced progressively: from observation and pair work, through semi-controlled exercises, to more open forms

of social interaction. Linguistic preparation, discussion of communication strategies, clear instructions, peer support, flexible participation, and reflective processing after the activity are essential for ensuring that outdoor learning remains developmentally supportive rather than emotionally burdensome.

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