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# ENHANCING PERSIAN SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH VIRTUAL REALITY DIGITAL GAMES: AN ACTIVITY THEORY APPROACH FOR IRAQI ARABIC-SPEAKING LEARNERS AT ILAM UNIVERSITY'S AZFA CENTER

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Abstract: This study explores the effectiveness of virtual reality (VR) digital games in improving Persian speaking skills among Iraqi Arabic-speaking learners at the Center for Teaching Persian to Non-Persian Speakers (AZFA), Ilam University, Iran. Using Activity Theory as a framework, five VR games were designed to simulate authentic Persian contexts, including a narrative game set in a Persian village during Nowruz and interactive scenarios like market negotiations and family gatherings. These games employ natural language processing and speech recognition to provide real-time feedback, targeting phonological challenges (e.g., Persian [ʒ] vs. Arabic [dʒ]) and cultural practices like taarof. An eight-week study with 200 learners (CEFR A1–C1) and a control group (N=150) using traditional methods showed that the VR group significantly outperformed the control group, with speaking fluency improving by 20% (vs. 7% for control), pronunciation accuracy by 19% (vs. 6%), and intercultural competence by 28% (vs. 11%). Engagement metrics indicated 32-minute average session durations and a 92% task completion rate. Learners reported that VR felt like "living in a Persian village." The study recommends integrating VR into AZFA curricula, exploring augmented reality (AR), and incorporating dialectal variations like Isfahani Persian for advanced learners. This framework offers a scalable model for less commonly taught languages, enhancing linguistic and cultural competence.

Keywords: activity theory, persian language learning, virtual reality games, speaking skills, intercultural competence, computational linguistics

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*Mejora de las habilidades del habla persia a través de juegos digitales de realidad virtual: un enfoque basado en la teoría de la actividad para estudiantes de habla árabe iraquí en el centro AZFA de la Universidad de Ilam*

*Resumen: Este estudio analiza la eficacia de los juegos digitales de realidad virtual (RV) para mejorar las habilidades lingüísticas en persa de los estudiantes iraquíes de habla árabe en el Centro para la Enseñanza del Persa a hablantes no nativos (AZFA) de la Universidad de Ilam, Irán. Utilizando la teoría de la actividad como marco, se diseñaron cinco juegos de RV para simular contextos persas auténticos, incluyendo un juego narrativo ambientado en un pueblo persa durante el Nowruz y escenarios interactivos como negociaciones en el mercado y reuniones familiares. Estos juegos emplean el procesamiento del lenguaje natural y el reconocimiento de voz para proporcionar retroalimentación en tiempo real, centrándose en los retos fonológicos (por ejemplo, el [ʒ] persa frente al [dʒ] árabe) y en prácticas culturales como el taarof. Un estudio de ocho semanas con 200 alumnos (MCER A1-C1) y un grupo de control (N=150) que utilizó métodos tradicionales demostró que el grupo de RV superó significativamente al grupo de control, con una mejora de la fluidez oral del 20 % (frente al 7 % del grupo de control), de la precisión en la pronunciación del 19 % (frente al 6 %) y la competencia intercultural en un 28 % (frente al 11 %). Las métricas de participación indicaron una duración media de las sesiones de 32 minutos y una tasa de finalización de tareas del 92 %. Los alumnos informaron de que la RV les hacía sentir como si estuvieran «viviendo en un pueblo persa». El estudio recomienda integrar la RV en los planes de estudio de AZFA, explorar la realidad aumentada (RA) e incorporar variaciones dialectales como el persa isfahani para los alumnos avanzados. Este marco ofrece un modelo escalable para las lenguas menos enseñadas, mejorando la competencia lingüística y cultural.*

*Palabras clave: teoría de la actividad, aprendizaje del persa, juegos de realidad virtual, habilidades orales, competencia intercultural, lingüística computacional.*

## 1. Introduction

The Center for Teaching Persian to Non-Persian Speakers (AZFA) at Ilam University, located near the Iran-Iraq border, serves as a critical hub for Iraqi Arabic-speaking learners seeking Persian proficiency amid growing cultural, educational, and economic ties between Iran and Iraq. These learners face distinct linguistic challenges, such as producing the Persian phoneme [ʒ] in words like ژاله [ʒɒːˈle] 'Zhaleh (a name),' often confused with Arabic [dʒ] or [ʃ], which impedes fluency (Koutlaki, 2010). Cultural practices like taarof, a system of polite refusal integral to Persian interactions, require nuanced understanding beyond linguistic skills (Beeman, 1986). For example, learners must respond appropriately to invitations like:

(1) بفرمائید تو، نوروزه
[befærmɒːjiːd tuː, nowruːz-e]
come.IMP.2PL in Nowruz-COP.3SG
'Come in, it's a Nowruz gathering' (formal, requiring taarof response).

This example underscores the linguistic-cultural challenge in Persian interactions. Iraqi learners must master taarof's indirect politeness, where VR simulations scaffold appropriate refusals to bridge Arabic directness gaps, enhancing authentic communication.

The scarcity of immersive digital resources for Persian, unlike widely taught languages like English, limits exposure to authentic contexts. Virtual reality (VR) offers a solution by simulating dynamic environments, such as a Tehran bazaar or a Nowruz celebration, enabling learners to practice speaking and cultural norms in realistic settings. This study leverages VR games, grounded in Activity Theory, to address these challenges, providing a tailored platform for Iraqi learners to enhance Persian speaking skills across CEFR A1–C1 levels.

Traditional language learning tools, such as textbooks or apps like Duolingo, emphasize isolated vocabulary and grammar drills, offering limited contextual practice (Chapelle, 2001). Learners may memorize terms like سفره [sofreh] 'tablecloth' but struggle to use them in cultural scenarios, such as describing a *Haft-Seen* table during Nowruz. VR bridges this gap with 360-degree environments that replicate sensory-rich settings, like the aroma of saffron in a market or the visuals of a Persian village, fostering real-time speaking practice (Lan, 2020). While 2D digital games show promise in language learning (Peterson, 2010), they lack VR's immersive depth, critical for addressing Iraqi learners' phonological (*e.g.*, [ʒ] vs. [dʒ]) and cultural challenges, such as taarof. Prior VR studies focus on widely taught languages, leaving Persian underexplored. This study introduces five VR games, including a narrative adaptation of Mercer Mayer's *Frog, Where Are You?* (1969) set in a Persian context, to enhance fluency, pronunciation, and intercultural competence. It also explores augmented reality (AR) as a cost-effective alternative and incorporates advanced levels (B2–C1) and dialectal variations (*e.g.*, Isfahani or Tehrani Persian) for future research.

This study employs Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987), which frames learning as a goal-directed, socially mediated process, to develop a VR-based framework for Iraqi learners at AZFA centers. It addresses three questions: How do VR games, informed by Activity Theory, enhance Persian speaking skills? How do linguistic and cultural data shape game design? What is their impact on fluency, pronunciation, and intercultural competence? The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews Activity Theory, VR in language education, narrative-based learning, and Iraqi learners' challenges, establishing the theoretical foundation. Section 3 details the methodology, including a sample of 200+ learners, a control group using traditional methods, testing of all five VR games, and data collection. Section 4 presents results from an eight-week study, analyzing improvements across metrics. Section 5 discusses findings, comparing VR to traditional tools and proposing AR and dialectal variations. Section 6 concludes with implications for AZFA curricula and future directions, including advanced proficiency levels and open-source VR tools. Persian examples use a three-level structure (script, Leipzig Glossing Rules transcription, English translation) for clarity, with glossing abbreviations in Section 7.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Activity Theory in Second Language Acquisition*

Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987) frames learning as a system of goal-directed activities mediated by tools, community, and cultural norms, making it ideal for second language acquisition (SLA). In Activity Theory, the 'activity system' consists of a subject (the learner), an object (the learning goal, such as mastering Persian pronunciation), mediating tools (*e.g.*, VR environments), rules (cultural norms like taarof), community (virtual native speakers), and division of labor (scaffolded tasks). This holistic view, rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasizes how contradictions in the system, such as phonological mismatches between Arabic and Persian, drive development through mediated interactions (Engeström, 1987). It aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding complex skills through authentic tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, practicing taarof in a VR Nowruz gathering helps learners master polite refusals:

(2) نه زحمت نکشید، ممنون

[næ, zæhmæt nakeʃiːd, mæmnuːn]

no effort NEG.pull.2PL thank.you

'No, don't trouble yourself, thank you' (formal, declining an offer).

This example illustrates Activity Theory's mediation principle. The VR environment acts as a tool to resolve the 'contradiction' of cultural unfamiliarity, while virtual characters represent the community that scaffolds the learner's response within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), enabling them to internalize taarof as a socially mediated norm (Vygotsky, 1978). Drawing on Activity Theory, this VR-mediated practice is predicted to support Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) by facilitating negotiation of meaning, such as clarifying taarof responses, leading to enhanced fluency, a relationship empirically tested in this study (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Similarly, the focus on community interactions addresses phonological and cultural challenges for Iraqi learners, as mediated tools like speech recognition bridge gaps in exposure (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Building on this foundation, the theory's emphasis on mediation makes VR an effective tool for socially situated learning. For instance, learners practicing taarof in a virtual Persian home internalize cultural norms through interaction with virtual characters. This contrasts with traditional methods, which often isolate language from context. Activity Theory's flexibility allows adaptation to advanced levels (B2–C1), where learners tackle complex tasks like narrating stories in regional dialects (*e.g.*, Isfahani Persian's distinct intonation). By integrating cultural elements, such as Nowruz rituals, VR games align with the theory's focus on socially mediated learning, ensuring relevance for Iraqi learners (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). This framework is scalable to other less commonly taught languages, offering a model for technology-enhanced SLA.

### *2.2. Virtual Reality in Language Education*

Virtual reality transforms language learning by providing immersive 360-degree environments that enhance engagement and motivation (Lan, 2020). Unlike apps like Duolingo, which focus on drills, VR simulates real-world interactions, such as bargaining in a Tehran bazaar:

(3) این فرش دستباف رو چند می‌دی؟

[iːn færʃ dæstbɒːf ro tʃænd miːdiː]

this carpet handwoven OBJ how.much give.2SG

'How much will you pay for the handwoven carpet?' (colloquial).

This bargaining phrase illustrates VR's contextual practice. Learners negotiate meaning in immersive bazaars, with speech recognition correcting colloquial forms, fostering fluency absent in traditional drills per Long's Interaction Hypothesis.

VR improves pronunciation and fluency through real-time feedback, correcting phonemes like [ʒ] in ژاله [ʒɒːˈle] 'Zhaleh' (Peterson, 2010). Sensory elements, such as market sounds or saffron aromas, create a sense of presence, enhancing outcomes (Gee, 2007). The lack of VR resources for Persian necessitates tailored applications for Iraqi learners' phonological and cultural challenges (Godwin-Jones, 2011). AR, as a portable alternative, could further democratize access, especially in resource-limited settings. VR's ability to simulate cultural scenarios, like Nowruz celebrations, fosters intercultural competence across CEFR A1–C1 levels, including advanced learners navigating dialectal variations.

VR's immersive environments enable contextual practice, critical for fluency. For example, learners negotiate prices in a VR bazaar, receiving feedback on grammar and cultural appropriateness (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). Unlike 2D games, VR's sensory richness increases motivation and retention (Lan, 2020). For advanced learners, VR can incorporate dialectal variations, such as Tehrani Persian's colloquial phrases, to enhance authenticity. AR offers a cost-effective alternative, projecting cultural scenarios onto real-world settings, which is ideal for AZFA's resource constraints. This study's VR games, tailored for Iraqi learners, fill a gap in Persian language education, offering a model for other less commonly taught languages.

### *2.3. Narrative-Based Learning*

Narrative-based learning, using Mercer Mayer's *Frog, Where Are You?* (1969), promotes oral fluency through storytelling in a VR Persian village during Nowruz:

(4) قورباغه پشت سبزه گم شده

[ɢurˈbɒːɢe poʃt-e sæbze gom ʃode]

frog behind-EZ sprouts lost become.PST.3SG

'The frog got lost behind the sprouts' (standard).

This narrative sentence demonstrates output hypothesis application. Embedding Nowruz elements like sprouts links syntax to cultural symbolism, promoting retention through VR's sensory-rich storytelling for Iraqi learners' limited exposure.

This aligns with Swain's Output Hypothesis (2005), emphasizing language production for acquisition (Tompkins, 2016). VR enhances narratives with immersive visuals (*e.g.*, blooming gardens) and sounds (*e.g.*, chirping birds), increasing engagement (Jurafsky & Martin, 2021). The adaptation incorporates cultural elements like Haft-Seen tables, novel for Persian SLA. For advanced learners (B2–C1), narratives can include dialectal variations, such as Isfahani Persian's unique lexicon, to challenge proficiency. VR's emotional engagement enhances vocabulary retention and syntactic complexity, critical for Iraqi learners with limited Persian storytelling exposure.

The integration of Nowruz rituals ensures cultural relevance, as learners describe Haft-Seen items like سبزه [sabzeh] 'sprouts' (Swain, 2005). VR's dynamic settings scaffold complex sentence structures, unlike traditional storytelling tasks. For advanced learners, dialectal variations enrich narratives, preparing them for real-world interactions. Speech recognition ensures accurate pronunciation, addressing phonemes like [ʒ]. This study's adaptation of a narrative framework into a Persian VR context is pioneering, offering a scalable model for other languages.

### *2.4. Challenges for Iraqi Learners*

As detailed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, Iraqi learners face phonological challenges, such as distinguishing Persian [ʒ] from Arabic [dʒ] or [ʃ] in words like ژاله [ʒɒ:ˈle] 'Zhaleh,' leading to mispronunciations (Koutlaki, ۲۰۱۰). Extending these, cultural practices like taarof or Nowruz greetings require contextual understanding:

(5) بفرمائید شیرینی، نوروزه

[befærmɒ:ji:d, ʃi:ri:ni: nowru:z-e]

come.IMP.2PL sweet Nowruz-COP.3SG

'Have some Nowruz sweets' (formal).

This invitation highlights intercultural barriers. VR's real-time scenarios teach taarof responses to festive offers, addressing Arabic-Persian norm differences and building competence via Activity Theory's socially mediated community interactions.

Traditional tools rarely provide such practice, exacerbating challenges (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). VR's real-time feedback and immersive scenarios address these issues, simulating Persian homes or markets. For advanced learners, dialectal variations (*e.g.*, Tehrani Persian's intonation) add complexity. AR could offer portable solutions, projecting cultural scenarios onto real-world settings. This study's VR framework, tailored for Iraqi learners, enhances linguistic and cultural competence, addressing their unique needs.

Building on the narrative-cultural integration in Section 2.3, unfamiliarity with Haft-Seen symbolism poses barriers for Iraqi learners. VR's sensory cues, like hyacinth scents or tanbur music, immerse them in traditions, aligning with Activity Theory's

social mediation (Engeström, 1987). Advanced learners can practice dialect-specific interactions, enhancing intercultural competence. This approach contrasts with textbooks, offering a culturally rich platform for language practice.

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1. Data Collection*

The study adopts a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) framework, emphasizing authentic tasks to promote speaking skills (Willis, 1996). Linguistic data were sourced from Thackston (1993) for Persian syntactic structures, ensuring accurate sentence formation across CEFR A1–C1 levels. Koutlaki (2010) informed cultural scenarios, including taarof and Nowruz etiquette, embedding cultural competence in game design. Speech recognition models, based on Nassif *et al.*, (2019), supported pronunciation feedback for phonemes like [ʒ]. Cultural authenticity was validated by Persian cultural experts to ensure accurate depictions of practices like arranging Haft-Seen items (Beeman, 1986). A corpus of 12,000 unique Persian sentences was developed, covering A1–C1 levels and incorporating dialectal variations for advanced learners (B2–C1) to support real-world applicability. Data from real-world interactions, such as bazaar dialogues and festive greetings, ensured ecological validity. For example, phrases like این گلیم خیلی گرونه [iːn geliːm kheiliː gerɒːne] 'This kilim is too expensive' were drawn from authentic exchanges. Multiple rounds of validation by linguistic and cultural experts ensured accuracy and relevance.

### *3.2. Proposed VR Games*

Five VR games, categorized as Narrative and Interactive Social, were designed to enhance speaking fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and intercultural competence for Iraqi learners across CEFR A1-C1 levels. Each game integrates Activity Theory's principles of goal-directed, socially mediated learning (Engeström, 1987), leveraging tools (VR technology), community (virtual native speakers), and cultural norms (*e.g.*, taarof, Nowruz rituals) to scaffold learning. Adaptive difficulty accommodates diverse proficiency levels, with advanced learners (B2-C1) tackling dialectal variations such as Tehrani or Isfahani Persian. The games employ natural language processing (NLP, powered by Rasa, version 3.5) and speech recognition (based on Nassif *et al.*, 2019) for real-time feedback, addressing phonological challenges (*e.g.*, Persian [ʒ] vs. Arabic [dʒ]) and cultural practices. Cultural authenticity was validated by Persian experts (Beeman, 1986), ensuring accurate depictions of settings like bazaars or Haft-Seen tables. Such sensory elements as market sounds and rosewater scents enhance immersion, aligning with Activity Theory's focus on contextual learning. The games are scalable, with potential AR adaptations for cost-effective deployment (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). Table 2 summarizes the games' objectives and tasks. Comprehensive testing of all five games ensures a holistic evaluation of their impact.

| Game | Objective | CEFR Tasks | Activity Theory Alignment |
|---|---|---|---|
| Frog's Persian Adventure | Narrative fluency | A1: Simple sentences; B2-C1: Dialectal stories | Tool: VR; Community: Virtual villagers |
| Nowruz Celebration | Cultural greetings | A1: Fixed phrases; B2-C1: Dialectal discussions | Tool: VR; Community: Virtual family |
| Tehran Market Negotiation | Conversational fluency | A1: Fixed phrases; B2-C1: Dialectal bargaining | Tool: VR; Community: Virtual vendors |
| Persian Family Gathering | Taarof and politeness | A1: Simple refusals; B2-C1: Complex taarof | Tool: VR; Community: Virtual hosts |
| Pronunciation Challenge | Phonemic accuracy ([ʒ]) | A1: Single phonemes; B2-C1: Dialectal sentences | Tool: VR; Community: Cultural settings |

Table 2. *Overview of VR Games*

### *3.2.1. Frog's Persian Adventure*

Inspired by Mercer Mayer's *Frog, Where Are You?* (1969), this narrative game immerses learners in a 3D Persian village during Nowruz, where they narrate a boy's search for his lost frog amidst cultural festivities. The game leverages Activity Theory by mediating learning through VR's immersive environment and community interactions with virtual villagers. Learners engage in storytelling tasks:

(6) سفرهٔ هفت‌سین کنار حوض است.

[sofreh-ye hæftsiːn kenɒːr-e hɒːwz æst]

tablecloth-EZ Haft-Seen beside-EZ pond COP.3SG

'The Haft-Seen table is beside the pond' (standard).

This descriptive structure evidences goal-directed activity. VR mediates spatial prepositions in cultural contexts like Haft-Seen, scaffolding from simple A1 sentences to dialectal narratives, resolving learners' syntactic challenges.

- A1 (Beginner): Extending the syntactic structures from Section 3.1, learners produce simple sentences (*e.g.*, دیدم [diːdæm] 'I saw,' قورباغه اینجاست[ɢurˈbɒːɢe iːndʒɒːst] 'The frog is here'), focusing on basic vocabulary and present tense, earning 5 points per correct sentence.
- A2–B1 (Intermediate): Learners create descriptive clauses such as پرید سبزه پشت قورباغه [ɢurˈbɒːɢe poʃt-e sæbze pæriːd] 'The frog jumped behind the sprouts', incorporating past tense and prepositions, earning 10 points.

- B2–C1 (Advanced): Learners narrate full stories with dialectal variations (*e.g.*, Tehrani colloquial: قورباغه ولو شده تو حوض [ɢurˈbɒːɢe velow ʃode tuː hɒːwz] 'The frog's sprawled in the pond'), earning 15 points for complexity and cultural accuracy.

NLP, powered by Rasa (Bocklisch *et al.*, 2017), provides feedback like "Use past tense: دیدم" or "Replace برکه with حوض for cultural accuracy". Immersive visuals, blooming gardens, children playing, tanbur music, and interactive elements like arranging Haft-Seen items such as سیب [siːb] 'apple,' and **سبزه** [sabzeh] 'sprouts' deepen engagement, aligning with Swain's Output Hypothesis (2005). Learners noted, "I felt like I was walking through a Persian village" (Lan, 2020). The game's progression from simple to complex structures fosters fluency and cultural competence, with AR adaptations proposed to project the village onto real-world settings.

### *3.2.2. Nowruz Celebration*

This narrative game places learners in a festive VR environment, simulating a Nowruz gathering in a Persian home, where they practice greetings and cultural interactions. Aligned with Activity Theory, the game uses VR as a mediating tool and virtual family members as the community to scaffold cultural learning. Tasks include:

(7) عید شما مبارک

[eiːd-e ʃomɒː mobɒːræk]

festival-EZ your blessed

'Happy Eid to you' (formal).

This greeting showcases cultural scaffolding. VR family interactions adapt phrases across levels, with feedback ensuring dialectical accuracy, aligning with Activity Theory to embed Nowruz rituals for enhanced intercultural fluency.

- A1: Learners use pre-set greetings like نوروز مبارک [nowruːz mobɒːræk] 'Happy Nowruz,' and سلامت باشید [salaːmat bɒːʃiːd] 'Be well', earning 5 points for accuracy.

- A2–B1: Learners vary phrases with synonyms like سال نو خجسته [sɒːl-e now xodʒaste] 'Happy New Year', earning 10 points for linguistic flexibility.

- B2–C1: Learners discuss customs in complex sentences with dialectal variations like Isfahani: عیدتون مبارک باشه، حالا بگین هفت سین چی داره [eiːdtuːn mobɒːræk bɒːʃe, hɒːlɒː begiːd hæftsiːn tʃiː dɒːre] 'Happy Eid, now tell me what's on the Haft-Seen', earning 15 points.

Feedback awards points for linguistic and cultural accuracy (*e.g.*, "Use مبارک for festive greetings"). Sensory cues, hyacinth scents, traditional music, visual Haft-Seen tables (*e.g.*, سمنو [samænuː] 'wheat pudding'), enhance immersion (Engeström, 1987). Advanced tasks require explaining cultural practices, such as the symbolism of Haft-Seen items, fostering intercultural competence. Learners reported, "I learned how to greet like Iranians." The game supports AR adaptations, projecting festive scenarios onto classrooms, with tasks validated by cultural experts (Beeman, 1986).

### *3.2.3. Tehran Market Negotiation*

This interactive social game immerses learners in a bustling VR Tehran bazaar, where they negotiate prices for items like handwoven carpets, fostering conversational fluency and cultural etiquette. Activity Theory informs the design, with VR as the mediating tool and virtual vendors as the community, encouraging negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996). Tasks include:

(8) این گلیم خیلی گرونه تخفیف میدی؟

[iːn geliːm kheiliː gerɒːne, tæxfiːf miːdiː]

this kilim very expensive.COP.3SG discount give.2SG

‘This kilim is too expensive, can you give a discount?’ (colloquial).

This negotiation query exemplifies conversational mediation. VR vendors prompt dynamic bargaining, correcting politeness markers to build cultural nuance, outperforming static methods in fostering Iraqi learners’ real-world adaptability.

- A1: Learners use fixed phrases like ارزون‌تر میشه؟ [ærzuntær miːʃe] ‘Can it be cheaper?’, earning ۱۰ points per phrase.
- A2–B1: Learners negotiate dynamically (*e.g.*, این فرش رو چند میفروشید؟ لطفاً تخفیف بدید[iːn færʃ ro tʃænd miːforuːʃiːd, lotfæn tæxfiːf bediːd] ‘How much for this carpet? Please give a discount’), earning 15 points.
- B2–C1: Learners use dialectal variations (*e.g.*, Tehrani: این گلیم رو ارزون‌تر حساب کن دیگه[iːn geliːm ro ærzuntær hesɒːb kon diːge] ‘Count this kilim cheaper, come on’), earning 20 points for fluency and cultural nuance.

Real-time feedback such as “Add لطفاً for politeness” enhances linguistic and cultural accuracy (Koutlaki, 2010). Sensory cues, hammering coppersmiths, saffron aromas, crowded stalls, create a realistic environment, with learners noting, “It felt like a real bazaar.” The game supports multiple negotiation rounds, with difficulty increasing by reducing vendor prompts for advanced learners. AR adaptations could project the bazaar onto classroom settings, reducing hardware costs (Shadiev & Yang, 2020).

### *3.2.4. Persian Family Gathering*

This interactive social game simulates a Nowruz gathering in a Persian home, where learners practice taarof, polite refusals and offers, through interactions with virtual family members. Activity Theory guides the design, with VR mediating cultural learning and virtual hosts fostering community engagement. Tasks include:

(9) بفرمائید شیرینی، نوروزه

[befærmɒːjiːd, ʃiːriːniː nowruːz-e]

come.IMP.2PL sweet Nowruz-COP.3SG

'Have some Nowruz sweets' (formal).

This offer illustrates taarof's layered politeness. VR hosts simulate refusals, providing feedback on multiple declines, which resolves cultural mismatches and promotes authentic social competence per sociocultural learning principles.

- A1: Learners decline politely as in ممنون، میل ندارم[mæmnuːn, miːl nædɒːræm] 'Thank you, I'm not hungry', earning 5 points.
- A2–B1: Learners use varied refusals as in نه، زحمت نکشید، تازه خوردم[næ, zæhmæt nakeʃiːd, tɒːze xordæm] 'No, don't trouble yourself, I just ate', earning 10 points.
- B2–C1: Learners engage in complex taarof exchanges with dialectal nuances (*e.g.*, Isfahani: نه، دستون درد نکنه، حالا نمی¬خوام [næ, dæstuːn dærd nækone, hɒːlɒː nemiːxɒːm] 'No, don't trouble yourself, I don't want it now'), earning 15 points.

Feedback awards points for cultural accuracy (*e.g.*, "Decline twice for taarof authenticity"). Sensory cues, rosewater scents, traditional decor, family chatter, enhance immersion (Beeman, 1986). Advanced learners explain cultural norms, such as multiple refusals before acceptance, fostering intercultural competence. Learners noted, "I learned how to be polite like Iranians." AR integration is proposed, projecting the gathering onto real-world settings for accessibility.

### *3.2.5. Pronunciation Challenge*

This interactive game targets the phonological challenges outlined in Section 2.4, focusing on phonemes like [ʒ], critical for Iraqi learners who confuse it with Arabic [dʒ] or [ʃ]. Activity Theory informs the design, with VR as the mediating tool and culturally relevant settings (for example, a Persian garden) as the community context. Tasks encompass:

(10) ژاله تو باغچه¬ست

[ʒɒːˈle tuː bɒːɢtʃe-st]

Zhaleh in garden-COP.3SG

'Zhaleh is in the garden' (standard).

This phonemic sentence targets [ʒ] mastery. VR waveforms correct Arabic substitutions in garden contexts, mediating phonological contradictions to achieve accurate production across CEFR levels in immersive, culturally relevant tasks.

- A1: Learners practice single phonemes such as [ʒ] in ژاله [ʒɒːˈle], earning 3 points per correct pronunciation.
- A2–B1: Learners use short phrases such as ژاله گل داره[ʒɒːˈle gol dɒːre] 'Zhaleh has a flower', earning 5 points.

- B2–C1: Learners incorporate [ʒ] into dialect-specific sentences (*e.g.*, Tehrani: ژاله تو باغچه داره گل می‌چینه [ʒɒ:ˈle tu: bɒ:ɢtʃe dɒ:re gol mi:tʃi:ne] ‘Zhaleh’s picking flowers in the garden’), earning 10 points.

Visual waveform feedback corrects errors (*e.g.*, “Your [ʒ] sounds like [dʒ]”), supported by deep neural networks (Nassif *et al.*, 2019). Cultural settings, like a garden with hyacinths, maintain engagement, with learners noting, “Waveforms helped me hear my mistakes.” The game includes progressive difficulty, with advanced learners tackling longer sentences and regional pronunciations. AR versions are proposed for cost-effective practice in classrooms.

Each game was rigorously tested for linguistic accuracy (using Thackston, 1993), cultural relevance (validated by Beeman, 1986), and pedagogical efficacy, ensuring alignment with Activity Theory’s goal-directed learning and comprehensive evaluation of their impact.

### *3.3. System Design*

The VR system integrates advanced technologies to deliver a linguistically accurate, culturally immersive, and scalable learning experience for CEFR A1–C1 learners. Developed using Unity (version 2023.1), the system creates 360-degree environments with Persian script (Vazir font) and sensory elements, such as bazaar sounds in Tehran Market Negotiation or blooming gardens in Frog’s Persian Adventure. Natural language processing, powered by Rasa (version 3.5), generates dynamic dialogues (*e.g.*, چطور می‌تونم کمکت کنم؟ [tʃetowr mi:tunæm komæket konæm] ‘How can I help you?’), adapting to learner responses (Bocklisch *et al.*, 2017). Speech recognition, based on deep neural networks (Nassif *et al.*, 2019), provides real-time feedback on phonemes like [ʒ], using visual waveforms to guide corrections. SQLite (version 3.42) stores learner progress, implementing spaced repetition algorithms (Roediger & Butler, 2011). Cultural scenarios were validated by experts to ensure authenticity (Beeman, 1986).

The system supports adaptive difficulty, with beginners receiving simplified prompts and advanced learners (B2–C1) tackling complex, dialect-specific tasks. The interface includes Persian subtitles, audio cues, and dialectal options for accessibility. Augmented reality integration, using ARCore (Google, 2023), projects scenarios onto real-world settings, reducing reliance on VR headsets. For example, Tehran Market Negotiation could be overlaid onto a classroom. Pilot testing achieved 96% uptime, with stress tests supporting 200+ users. The system’s open-source potential, leveraging Unity’s asset pipeline, enables adaptation for other languages like Kurdish, aligning with AZFA’s context. An AR prototype was tested, projecting Nowruz Celebration onto a classroom, informing future scalability.

### *3.4. Pilot Study*

An eight-week experimental study was conducted at Ilam University’s AZFA Center, involving 200 Iraqi learners (CEFR A1-C1, 100 male, 100 female, aged 18-35) and a control group (N=150, CEFR A1-C1, 75 male, 75 female) using traditional methods

(textbooks, audio recordings). The control group size (N=150) was determined to balance statistical power with logistical constraints, including limited VR headset availability and scheduling limitations at AZFA center's language lab. A priori power analysis confirmed 80% power to detect medium effect sizes ($d = 0.5$, $\alpha = 0.05$), consistent with similar second language acquisition studies (Peterson, 2010). Stratified random sampling ensured representativeness across CEFR levels (37 A1, 76 A2–B1, 37 B2-C1) and gender (Dörnyei, 2007). All five VR games were tested to evaluate their impact on speaking fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and intercultural competence. The control group followed AZFA's standard curriculum for comparison. This study was conducted at AZFA center's language lab, with VR sessions scheduled to manage 20 headsets.

Ethical Considerations: Due to the absence of a formal ethics committee at AZFA center, ethical procedures were implemented in accordance with best practices for educational research. All participants (N=350) provided verbal informed consent prior to participation, with the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature clearly explained in both Persian and Arabic to ensure comprehension. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and all data were anonymized to protect privacy. No personal identifiers were collected, and data were stored securely in compliance with ethical research guidelines (Dörnyei, 2007).

Pre- and Post-Tests:

1. Speaking Fluency: Measured by narrative coherence (sentences per minute, scored via a 5-point rubric; Luoma, 2004).
2. Pronunciation Accuracy: Evaluated [ʒ] production (percentage of correct pronunciations; Nassif *et al.*, 2019).
3. Intercultural Competence: Assessed via situational judgment tasks (such as taarof responses, scored on a 5-point rubric; Byram, 1997).

Tests were administered by trained evaluators (Cohen's kappa = 0.82). Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 27) with paired t-tests, ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests, and Cohen's d for effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Qualitative feedback (N=60 VR, N=45 control) was coded using NVivo (version 12) for themes like engagement and cultural learning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An AR prototype was tested with 20 VR learners, projecting Tehran Market Negotiation onto a classroom, to assess feasibility.

## 4. Results

The eight-week study (N=200, control N=150) demonstrated significant improvements, with the VR group outperforming the control group, as summarized in Table 3. Baseline equivalence was confirmed between VR and control groups (*e.g.*, fluency: $t(348) = 0.50$, $p = 0.62$; pronunciation: $t(348) = 0.42$, $p = 0.67$; intercultural competence: $t(348) = 0.47$, $p = 0.64$), ensuring improvements are attributable to the VR intervention. Engagement Metrics and AR Prototype Feedback are discussed separately due to their secondary, non-comparative nature.

| Metric | VR Pre-Test | VR Post-Test | VR Improvement | Control Pre-Test | Control Post-Test | Control Improvement | SD | p-value | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Speaking Fluency | 60% (4.0 s/m) | 80% (5.8 s/m) | 20% (1.8 s/m) | 58% (3.8 s/m) | 65% (4.5 s/m) | 7% (0.7 s/m) | 4.8 | <0.01 | 0.85 |
| Pronunciation ([ʒ]) | 56% | 75% | 19% | 54% | 60% | 6% | 4.5 | <0.01 | 0.82 |
| Intercultural Competence | 46% | 74% | 28% | 44% | 55% | 11% | 5.2 | <0.001 | 0.92 |

Note: Fluency measured in sentences per minute (s/m); pronunciation as percentage of correct [ʒ] productions; intercultural competence as percentage of correct responses. Engagement Metrics and AR Prototype Feedback are excluded as they are secondary, non-comparative metrics (see Sections 4.4 and 4.5).

Table 3. *Study Results (N=200 VR, N=150 Control)*

To provide detailed insights, subgroup analyses for CEFR levels (A1, A2-B1, B2-C1) are presented in Tables 4–6.

| Metric | VR Pre-Test | VR Post-Test | VR Improvement | Control Pre-Test | Control Post-Test | Control Improvement | SD | p-value | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Speaking Fluency | 40% (2.5 s/m) | 60% (4.0 s/m) | 20% (1.5 s/m) | 38% (2.3 s/m) | 45% (2.8 s/m) | 7% (0.5 s/m) | 4.0 | <0.01 | 0.70 |
| Pronunciation ([ʒ]) | 40% | 60% | 20% | 38% | 45% | 7% | 4.2 | <0.01 | 0.65 |
| Intercultural Competence | 30% | 55% | 25% | 28% | 40% | 12% | 4.8 | <0.01 | 0.75 |

Table 4. *CEFR A1 Results (N=50 VR, N=37 Control)*

| Metric | VR Pre-Test | VR Post-Test | VR Improvement | Control Pre-Test | Control Post-Test | Control Improvement | SD | p-value | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Speaking Fluency | 55% (4.0 s/m) | 75% (5.5 s/m) | 20% (1.5 s/m) | 53% (3.8 s/m) | 60% (4.3 s/m) | 7% (0.5 s/m) | 4.5 | <0.01 | 0.80 |
| Pronunciation ([ʒ]) | 55% | 75% | 20% | 53% | 60% | 7% | 4.3 | <0.01 | 0.80 |
| Intercultural Competence | 45% | 70% | 25% | 43% | 55% | 12% | 5.0 | <0.001 | 0.85 |

Table 5. *CEFR A2–B1 Results (N=100 VR, N=76 Control)*

| Metric | VR Pre-Test | VR Post-Test | VR Improvement | Control Pre-Test | Control Post-Test | Control Improvement | SD | p-value | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Speaking Fluency | 70% (5.5 s/m) | 90% (7.0 s/m) | 20% (1.5 s/m) | 68% (5.3 s/m) | 75% (5.8 s/m) | 7% (0.5 s/m) | 5.0 | <0.01 | 0.95 |
| Pronunciation ([ʒ]) | 70% | 90% | 20% | 68% | 75% | 7% | 4.8 | <0.01 | 0.90 |
| Intercultural Competence | 60% | 90% | 30% | 58% | 70% | 12% | 5.5 | <0.001 | 1.00 |

Table 6. *CEFR B2–C1 Results (N=50 VR, N=37 Control)*

### *4.1. Speaking Fluency*

The VR group improved from 4.0 to 5.8 sentences per minute ($t(199) = 6.45$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.85$), producing narratives like:

(11) قورباغه تو حوض پرید

[ɢurˈbɒːɢe tuː hɒːwz pæriːd]

frog in pond jumped.PST.3SG

'The frog jumped into the pond' (standard).

This fluent narrative output evidences VR's immersion. Reduced hesitations in past-tense storytelling reflect gains from mediated prompts, supporting Swain's hypothesis by enabling coherent, context-embedded speech production.

The control group improved from 3.8 to 4.5 sentences per minute ($t(149) = 3.20$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.33$). ANOVA confirmed VR's superiority ($F(1,348) = 15.10$, $p < 0.01$). Subgroup analyses (Tables 4–6) revealed A1 learners (N=37 control) progressed from 2.3 to 2.8 sentences per minute ($d = 0.20$), A2-B1 (N=76 control) from 3.8 to 4.3 ($d = 0.25$), and B2-C1 (N=37 control) from 5.3 to 5.8 ($d = 0.30$), with advanced learners incorporating dialectal variations (*e.g.*, Tehrani colloquial intonation). Frog's Persian Adventure and Nowruz Celebration reduced hesitations, particularly for intermediates (Lan, 2020). Qualitative feedback highlighted confidence gains, with A1 learners noting, "VR helped me speak without fear," and B2-C1 learners appreciating dialectal tasks for real-world relevance.

### *4.2. Pronunciation Accuracy*

Pronunciation of [ʒ], targeted in the Pronunciation Challenge (Section 3.2.5), improved from 56% to 75% ($t(199) = 5.98$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.82$), with 88% mastering ژاله [ʒɒːˈle]:

(12) ژاله تو باغچه گل می‌چینه

[ʒɒːˈle tuː bɒːɢtʃe gol miːtʃiːne]

Zhaleh in garden flower pick.PRES.3SG

'Zhaleh is picking flowers in the garden' (standard).

This complex phrase demonstrates pronunciation progress. VR feedback on [ʒ] in ongoing actions corrects errors, linking phonology to cultural scenes like gardens, yielding higher accuracy than control group drills.

The control group improved from 54% to 60% ($t(149) = 2.90$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.30$). ANOVA showed differences ($F(1,348) = 11.80$, $p < 0.01$). Subgroup analyses (Tables 4-6) showed A1 learners (N=37 control) improved from 38% to 45% ($d = 0.20$), A2–B1 (N=76 control) from 53% to 60% ($d = 0.25$), and B2–C1 (N=37 control) from 68% to 75% ($d = 0.30$), with advanced learners mastering dialect-specific phonology (*e.g.*, Tehrani [ʒ] articulation). The Pronunciation Challenge's waveform feedback corrected errors like [dʒ] substitution, with 90% of intermediates reporting, "Waveforms showed me how to fix [ʒ]." B2-C1 learners valued dialectal tasks for regional authenticity.

### *4.3. Intercultural Competence*

Intercultural competence rose from 46% to 74% ($t(199) = 7.12$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.92$), with 92% mastering taarof, as practiced in Persian Family Gathering (Section 3.2.4):

(13) نه، ممنون زحمت نکشید

[næ, mæmnuːn, zæhmæt nakeʃiːd]

no thank.you effort NEG.pull.2PL

'No, thank you, don't trouble yourself' (formal).

This taarof response highlights intercultural gains. VR's simulated gatherings teach refusal sequences, resolving norm contradictions and boosting judgment accuracy through Activity Theory's community-mediated cultural practice.

The control group improved from 44% to 55% ($t(149) = 3.60$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.41$). ANOVA confirmed VR's advantage ($F(1,348) = 17.20$, $p < 0.001$). Subgroup analyses (Tables 4-6) showed A1 learners (N=37 control) improved from 28% to 40% ($d = 0.30$), A2–B1 (N=76 control) from 43% to 55% ($d = 0.35$), and B2-C1 (N=37 control) from 58% to 70% ($d = 0.40$), with advanced learners using dialectal taarof (*e.g.*, Tehrani informal refusals). This immersion, with sensory cues (*e.g.*, rosewater scents), enhanced authenticity (Koutlaki, 2010). Learners reported, "*I learned to be polite like Iranians,*" with B2-C1 learners valuing dialectal nuances.

### *4.4. Engagement Metrics*

VR sessions averaged 32 minutes with a 92% task completion rate, as shown in Table 7.

| Game | Average Session (min) | Completion Rate (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Frog's Persian Adventure | 36 | 94 |
| Nowruz Celebration | 33 | 92 |
| Tehran Market Negotiation | 30 | 90 |
| Persian Family Gathering | 31 | 91 |
| Pronunciation Challenge | 29 | 89 |
| Overall | 32 | 92 |

Table 7. *Engagement Metrics (N=200)*

A1 learners averaged 28 minutes (90% completion), A2-B1 32 minutes (92%), and B2-C1 36 minutes (95%), with advanced learners engaging longer due to dialectal tasks. The control group averaged 20-minute sessions with 70% completion ($F(1,348) = 18.76$, $p < 0.001$). Frog's Persian Adventure was most engaging for A1 learners (38 minutes, 95%), while Tehran Market Negotiation appealed to B2-C1 learners (34 minutes, 93%) for its dynamic interactions. Qualitative feedback highlighted sensory cues (*e.g.*, market sounds) and dialectal tasks as motivators, with one learner noting, "Negotiating in VR felt like a real bazaar" (Lan, 2020).

### *4.5. AR Prototype Feedback*

A small-scale AR prototype, tested with 20 VR learners, projected Tehran Market Negotiation onto a classroom using ARCore (Google, 2023). Learners used smartphones to interact with virtual vendors overlaid on physical desks, completing tasks like bargaining for a kilim. The prototype achieved 87% satisfaction, with learners appreciating portability and ease of use (*e.g.*, "AR was convenient for quick practice"). However, 65% noted VR's superior immersion due to its 360-degree environment and sensory depth (*e.g.*, "AR felt real but less vivid"). Technical challenges included inconsistent tracking in low-light conditions (reported by 30% of testers) and occasional lag in dialogue processing. These findings suggest AR's potential as a cost-effective alternative, particularly for resource-limited settings, but further optimization is needed for tracking and immersion (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). Qualitative feedback was coded for themes like accessibility and engagement, supporting AR's scalability for classroom use.

## 5. Discussion

The 20% fluency improvement (Section 4.1) in the VR group, compared to the control group's 7% gain, underscores VR's efficacy in fostering narrative and conversational skills, aligning with prior studies on immersive learning (Lan, 2020; Peterson, 2010). Frog's Persian Adventure and Nowruz Celebration scaffolded complex narratives, such as (11), enabling learners to produce coherent sentences with reduced hesitations, supporting Swain's Output Hypothesis (2005). Advanced learners' use of dialectal

variations enhanced authenticity, preparing them for diverse Persian-speaking contexts. The control group's modest gains reflect traditional methods' limitations in providing contextual practice (Chapelle, 2001). Extending the [ʒ] gains from Section 4.2, the 19% pronunciation improvement addressed Iraqi learners' challenges with [ʒ], as seen in (12), with waveform feedback in Pronunciation Challenge outperforming the control group's 6% gain (Nassif *et al.*, 2019). This aligns with studies emphasizing real-time feedback in VR (Peterson, 2010). The 28% intercultural increase (Section 4.3), highlights VR's strength in taarof simulations, surpassing the control group's 11% improvement (Koutlaki, 2010). Dialectal tasks for B2-C1 learners added cultural depth, a novel contribution to Persian SLA.

As confirmed in Section 3.2, testing all five games confirmed their complementary roles: Frog's Persian Adventure and Nowruz Celebration enhanced narrative fluency, Tehran Market Negotiation and Persian Family Gathering fostered conversational skills, and Pronunciation Challenge targeted phonemic accuracy. This adaptation of *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer, 1969), embedding Haft-Seen elements, is pioneering, aligning with narrative-based learning theories (Tompkins, 2016). The AR prototype's 87% satisfaction rate suggests its potential as a portable, cost-effective alternative, particularly for AZFA's resource constraints (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). However, VR's superior immersion, as noted by 65% of testers, indicates it remains the gold standard for deep engagement. The 32-minute session duration and 92% completion rate (Table 7) reflect high motivation, driven by sensory cues and culturally relevant tasks, contrasting with the control group's 20-minute sessions and 70% completion.

The control group size (N=150) provided robust statistical power for detecting medium effect sizes ($d = 0.5$, Cohen, 1988). This size, while constrained by logistical factors such as limited VR headset availability and scheduling challenges at AZFA center's language lab, ensured reliable comparisons across CEFR levels (A1-C1). To further enhance robustness, baseline equivalence was confirmed through t-tests, and subgroup analyses (Tables 4-6) provided detailed insights into VR's efficacy across proficiency levels. Additional limitations include VR's high cost, potential learner fatigue in 32-minute sessions, and limited generalizability beyond Iraqi learners. Solutions include developing open-source VR tools and integrating AR for cost-effective deployment. Cultural transfer, such as similarities between Arabic hospitality norms and Persian taarof (*e.g.*, polite refusals), enhanced engagement, as VR bridged nuanced differences (*e.g.*, taarof's multiple refusals before acceptance). Future studies should explore longitudinal effects, larger control groups, and mixed-effects models to further validate findings and enhance precision in subgroup analyses (Dörnyei, 2007).

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates VR's effectiveness in enhancing Persian speaking skills for Iraqi learners at AZFA, achieving 20% fluency, 19% pronunciation, and 28% intercultural competence improvements, significantly outperforming the control group's gains (7%, 6%, 11%). The five VR games, grounded in Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987), address phonological and cultural challenges through immersive, culturally rich tasks. The AR prototype's 87% satisfaction rate highlights its potential

as a cost-effective alternative. AZFA center should integrate VR into curricula, train instructors, and develop open-source tools to enhance accessibility. Future research should explore AR scalability, longitudinal effects, and dialectal variations for advanced learners, extending the framework to languages like Kurdish or Arabic for broader impact in technology-enhanced language education.

## 6. Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the design, execution, or publication of this study.

## 7. Glossing Abbreviations

1SG: First person singular
2SG: Second person singular
2PL: Second person plural
3SG: Third person singular
COP: Copula
IMP: Imperative
EZ: Ezafe
NEG: Negative
OBJ: Object marker
PST: Past tense
PRES: Present tense

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