

CONNECTING WITH THE PAST, SHAPING THE FUTURE: THE POWER OF ORAL HISTORY

Blerta MUSTAFA

University of Prishtina, Kosovo
E-mail: blerta.mustafa@uni-pr.edu, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8094-0120

Zinaide GRUDA

University of Prishtina, Kosovo
E-mail: zinaide.gruda@uni-pr.edu, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4630-8433

Laura CRUZ

Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence - Penn State, the USA
E-mail: lxc601@psu.edu, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5817-8934

ABSTRACT: Oral history is an innovative approach that creates opportunities for students to learn about the world through inquiry, authentic and transformative learning. This study explores how using oral history as an effective pedagogical tool in an EFL context can transform student learning. Through experiential learning, undergraduate students of the English Language and Literature Department of the University of Prishtina interviewed community members, engaged with cultural, traditional and historical narratives and developed digital projects to document and preserve untold stories, which they then presented in front of an authentic audience at the annual student conference. Data collected through reflection papers, a focus group interview, and post conference insights reveal that students' learning journey was marked by a "roller coaster" of emotions and multiple challenges, including adjusting to a new research approach, identifying suitable interviewees, and navigating the video editing techniques. Despite the challenges, students considered the project a rewarding experience, which helped them transform their learning and support their growth into active citizens. More importantly, through this experience, students not only grew academically but they also developed labor-marked competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, digital literacy, communication, and linguistic and intercultural competencies. They also conveyed a great sense of pride, commitment and agency to safeguarding their country's history, tradition and culture. These findings highlight the value of integrating oral history projects in transforming students' learning experiences and in preparing them better for the challenges of the real world.

KEYWORDS: oral history, agentic learning, 21st century skills, authentic learning, active citizenship, EFL, experiential learning

INTRODUCTION

Meeting the increasingly complex demands of the 21st century labor market cannot be achieved through traditional lecture-based teaching methods, which are often disconnected from the real world. Instead, higher education institutions have increasingly shifted towards creating opportunities for students to learn about the world around them through inquiry and discovery. Authentic learning, defined as learning embedded into meaningful "real-life" situations (Jonassen, Howland, Marra & Crismond, 2008), allows students to engage in personally relevant learning activities that take place within a "culture similar to the applied setting" (Iucu & Marin, 2014, p. 414). Besides maintaining motivation and extending accountability for their own learning, authentic learning enjoins students to develop a range of 21st century skills, such as problem-solving, interpersonal skills, resilience, empathy and so forth (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). In the process they also learn how to deal with uncertainties and how to take a more proactive role. As Pitchford et al note, "it helps students move from bystander to actor, from 'lurker' to contributor, from the periphery to the centre" (2021, p. ix).

Oral history projects are intended to engage students in authentic forms of learning. Through sustained engagement, and by conversing with the community and recording their stories, students not only learn practical skills applicable in the real world, but they also recognize their civic potential to make real changes and be productive contributors to an increasingly global society (Schenck & Wetzel, 2022). However, establishing classroom environments where students feel comfortable to go outside of the classroom to explore and co-construct meaning with the community relies heavily on the instructors. In their roles as facilitators, scaffolders and mentors, instructors are expected to challenge students with tasks that mirror real-life issues. In this way, they are inviting students to take a journey that could

transform their learning while simultaneously fostering their development as socially responsible citizens.

This paper explores the use of oral history as a pedagogical tool to equip students with transversal skills, enrich their linguistic and intercultural competencies, and promote active citizenship. It shares the experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an English language course at the English Language and Literature Department of the University of Prishtina in Kosovo who have experienced transformation of their learning as witnesses of oral histories. It demonstrates how oral history may bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world interaction, highlighting its power to revolutionize education. Finally, the study argues that teaching oral history to students gives them a sense of agency and enables them to make significant contributions to historical preservation and public conversation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite being established as a modern technique for historical documentation of the memoirs of significant people in American life in 1948 (Leavy, 2011), oral history has only recently become a pedagogically innovative approach integrated in education (Truong-White, 2016). It is a process that involves conducting and recording interviews with people in order to get their stories about the past. When analyzing the collected material, learners need to find means to understand, as Portelli (2009) pointed out, what was said, how it was said, why it was said and what it meant. As such, oral history offers an experiential and inclusive method of learning, always referring to the past as a critical point for the interpretation of the development of the local society. However, oral history is not a tool that can be used in history and social study programmes only; it finds application in other fields as well, such as English, drama, journalism, science, and so on (Ritchie, 2003).

Oral histories are inherently embedded in authentic contexts. By employing oral history in education, instructors enable their students to engage in community-engaged research, raise social awareness and build their own cultural identity (Ariza, 2007; Baildon & Blackburn, 2012; Carmona & Bernal, 2012; Foulis, 2018; Lin, 2009; Norton, 2006). The experience with oral history is strengthened when students meet and talk to people they would not normally have an opportunity to meet as it makes them discover the impact the events of the past have had on people like them, a process Baildon and Blackburn refer to as the “democratization of memory” (2012, p. 50). As a result, they expand their consciousness related to the past and create a link between the class and the outside world (Ritchie, 2003). In this way, students are able to create “a common citizenship from the different perspectives in their communities” (Brockmann in Truong-White, 2016; Nunes, 2019) and a feeling of solidarity and respect for the members of the community (Florez Gonzalez, 2018).

Consequently, by being more engaged in their learning, students develop into agentive learners (Nunan, 2004). The concept of agency has been scarcely explored empirically; however, it has gained interest in the field of applied linguistics in recent years. Van Lier (2008) and other scholars consider agency to be an action that learners do and act towards the world. In addition, SLA scholars have linked language learning and agency. In their empirical study, which is one of the few, Little et al. (2017) argue that agency is an individual and collective ability and its development can be facilitated by the teachers. According to the study they conducted, Little et al. (2017) came to the conclusion that agentive learners “assume responsibility for managing their own learning: setting targets, making choices, taking decisions, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes” (p. 4). Therefore, by working on an oral history project, which is a collaborative task, students experience the sense of accomplishment upon successful completion of their task (Little et al., 2017). In addition, students feel proud for being able to bring voices to the stories older people share with them in oral history. Another benefit of working with such projects results in authentic communication which promotes “collaborative construction of knowledge” (Little et al., 2017) due to the fact that it demands interaction and sharing of ideas among learners working together. Furthermore, learners obtain negotiating skills through collaborative tasks, which is an important element in language learning (Lai & Li, 2011). The key to agentive learning is empowering students not only to have agency over their own learning, but also to learn how to be effective agents of change.

As described above, oral history projects have a number of identified benefits, but they also carry some risks (Llewellyn & Ng-A-Fook, 2017), notably the potential to overwhelm students’ cognitive load, both in terms of content and process. Due to the lack of background knowledge on the

specific area of interest, students may be unaware of the process of selecting the topic and what criteria to use to choose it (Taskeen et al., 2014). Furthermore, identifying an appropriate scope for the topic of research can be challenging for novice learners (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2018). Students may also face challenges in accessing and mastering the technological skills necessary for producing and disseminating digital content (Quah & Ng, 2022; Ting, 2013).

However, oral history projects cannot have the same effect without close supervision by the instructor. Apart from building knowledge in students, teachers build their capacity for independent learning through a student-centred approach. Constant interaction with teachers and peers and guided learning enable students to cope with challenging tasks. Thus, the Vygotskian zone of proximal development becomes more successful when used in combination with scaffolding provided by the teacher to enhance students' development. Even though students of different ability levels can conduct an oral history and benefit from it, it is mandatory that they receive guidance by the course instructor related to the elements of the local history, culture and traditions as well as the interviewing process including the interview outline, writing interview questions, designing the informed consent form, using tips for a good interview, producing a video on the research topic, writing the essay and present at the annual student conference.

The whole oral history project can be a frustrating and demanding process for the students as they lack background knowledge. By working on an oral history project under the constant supervision of the instructor, students realize that "... there is more to the process than just interviewing someone" (Ritchie, 2003). They understand that the events of the past are linked to the experiences that members of the community went through. Hence, as Christodoulou (in Truong-White, 2016) and Ehlman et al. (2011) argue, students develop emotions that challenge their prior practices, beliefs and habits and further become open to personal transformation.

In addition, to construct the future based on the past and the present it is required to employ the innovative use of technology (Anderson and Hamilton in Truong-White, 2016), which helps dissemination of the oral history. It helps students to implement oral history through: a) embodied learning where students further develop the existing knowledge and skill sets and as a result engage in a collaborative task, b) social responsibility that develops students' sense of cultural, social and emotional intelligence, and c) life-long learning which enables students to grow independent learners and build self-esteem.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted with the undergraduate students of the second year of the Department of English Language and Literature of the University of Prishtina in Kosovo. They all attended English 4 course, a mandatory integrated-skills course, which requires students to conduct group research on a topic of their choice, using an oral history approach. Moreover, the course focuses on the development of written and oral communication skills, critical and creative thinking skills, problem solving skills and teamwork. For fifteen weeks, students worked in teams of three or four and went through a step-by-step approach to identify the oral history topic, conducted background research, compiled interview questions, identified and conducted video interviews, transcribed interviews, produced a four-minute video, wrote an essay, presented at the annual student conference and wrote a learning journey reflection. In addition to the guidance from the instructors, the students received regular feedback from their peers and expert insight from guest speakers. Nearly all students fell into the category of traditionally-aged college students (i.e. under 25 years of age). The majority were female (77%) and ethnically Albanian.

The majority of students only had a fragmented understanding of their cultural and historical heritage, especially regarding the decade of long oppression, which led to an armed conflict in the 1990's, and concluded with NATO's intervention - a lived experience by their parents - but a distant event for them. During that time, university instruction moved underground, taking place largely in clandestine locations such as home garages and basements. For these reasons, these students have had few chances to learn about their culture as part of their formal education. For their oral history project, they were encouraged to explore topics related to [the country's] culture, tradition and history. They conducted the interviews in the native tongue Albanian, but their stories were shared publicly via essays, videos and presentations in the English language.

To explore students' experiences with the oral history project, the research was conducted by the course instructor (hereafter researcher 1 (R1)) in collaboration with a colleague from the same department (hereafter researcher 2 (R2)), but who was not directly involved in the course. The methodology underlying the research is of qualitative orientation. For the purpose of collecting data for the research, the researchers used the following instruments: reflection papers (R) of sixty-four undergraduate students who completed the oral history project, a focus group interview (I) with five students and insights of fifty-two students submitted during the Annual Student Conference (CI). The aim of using these research instruments was to gain in-depth understanding of students' experience with the oral history project. Primary data were obtained from the reflection papers submitted by the students, whereas the secondary data were retrieved from the focus group interview and students' insights after the conference.

In their work with data analysis, the researchers divided the reflective papers into two sets, one of them read thirty-four, the other thirty reflection papers. Each researcher independently read interview transcripts and categorized them. They repeated the same process for the post-conference insights. Afterwards, they reconvened to discuss, cross-checked their interpretation, to ensure consistency and reliability in data interpretation.

In order to create a possibility for a deep investigation of students' experiences with oral history projects, the researchers designed open-ended questions for the interviews. Before the focus group interview, the researcher 2 conducted a pilot interview with a student in order to establish validity and reliability of the interview questions. After the pilot interview, both researchers read the transcript and concluded that the subject they intended to investigate was adequately captured by the interview procedure and questions.

For the focus group interview, the researchers used the random purposive sampling to select the interviewees. The researchers used the alphabetical order list and selected one student from the beginning, two from the middle and two from the end of the list. The participants were informed about the research aims and objectives and consent was obtained prior to interviews. They were assured that their data will remain confidential and anonymized (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The focus group interview made it possible for the participants to raise issues that they considered crucial for them, hence providing rich data material for analysis. The focus group interview was conducted online via Google meet by the researcher 2 to minimize any power issues that otherwise the course instructor (researcher 1) might have had. The interview was conducted in English. The respondents were able to understand all the interview questions. The interview was recorded and transcribed with the help of the Scribbl tool introduced by Google. Nevertheless, researcher 2 went through the transcript following the video recording of the interview to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data. The third researcher, from a renowned institution in the USA, but familiar with the [country's] context was invited to join in to ensure objectivity during the data analysis. Furthermore, one's expertise was necessary in gaining deeper insights on the matter.

The findings of the qualitative data obtained in this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are EFL students' experiences with the oral history project?
2. What is the influence of oral history projects on EFL students' understanding of their country's past?

FINDINGS/RESULTS

Upon analyzing data, the researchers classified the data into the two main themes: challenges and opportunities. Within the theme of challenges, the data retrieved produced the following sub-themes: topic selection, interview process and technology and video post-production. On the other hand, the opportunities covered the following sub-themes: authentic learning, meta-cognition and students' sense of agency.

CHALLENGES

Topic Selection

The process of identifying a topic to conduct an oral history project was reported to have been the most challenging experience for most of the students. According to reflections, thirty-seven out of sixty-four students reported to have found it difficult to come up with a topic. As this was the seventh

cohort, coming up with a topic that was not previously explored “*caused frustration*” (R61) and was perceived to be “*not only difficult but almost impossible for us to do*” (R34). Students had to exhaust all options to “*select a topic which was not covered before as well as a topic which would be attractive for our audience*” (R22). However, the course instructor’s refusal of topic proposals made the frustration even worse. As one of the students commented: “*the rejection of a dozen of topics by the professor made me pessimistic if I would ever be able to move on to the next step*” (R15).

Coming up with a topic also meant having some background knowledge and/or having the right skills and resources to conduct background research. Not having previous knowledge on the topic affected the process of decision-making: as one of the students pointed out during the focus group interview, “*we did not know much about that topic...I got scared because of that I will fail the project*” (I4). Having in mind that some of the topics were very specific and not documented in the past, students found it difficult to find information on the topic. In her reference to the topic she worked on, one of the students stated “*this is a craft which is going extinct so even finding information about it was a struggle itself*” (R52). There was also the perception that since this was their first experience they were not equipped with appropriate research skills, as stated below:

as it was our first time doing one [oral history project] and for it to be successful, we needed to have the right skills. I felt that I was not ready to take on such a huge responsibility and was unsure on how successful we would be (R2)

For some, topic selection was difficult as it had to be negotiated and approved by group members, as suggested by the following reflection: “*The topic choosing process was difficult indeed, trying to gather our thoughts and ideas as a group was quite the challenge but once we were able to think as one we saw progress and came to a decision*” (R18).

Overall, the task of coming up with an original topic for the project, persuading team members that the project is doable and getting topic approval by the professor were the main challenges that student encountered at the initial stage of the project, as summarized below:

We quickly learned that it [topic selection] wouldn't be [easy] at all. Some topics were done previously, some we couldn't find interviewees for, some the group members or professor wouldn't approve of and so on. (R7)

Interview Process

Identifying people who have stories to tell on the selected topic was not an easy task for most students: “*we had to find people and that was really a tough challenge because we didn't know no one [sic]¹ about that [topic]*” (I4). Also, allocating appropriate interviewees required time, as suggested by the following: “*finding six interviewees was the most difficult bump in my group's road. It took us so much time to find them*” (R8).

Also, because some of the topics will soon become obsolete, finding the right interviewees was difficult but rewarding too, as pointed out in the reflection: “*I would say finding our blacksmiths was extremely hard but it was like a treasure hunt and this is what made it so more interesting and exciting because I knew these people were actual gems and they had a lot to share*” (R51).

Even when students found the right people to talk to, they faced other roadblocks: “*since we were working on a project which required interviewees who were older than fifty years old, of course, we faced many rejections*” (R50). Rejections were done for different reasons: many people were not open to the idea of being filmed and/or audio recorded, hence they either did not accept to be part of it or they canceled it later. There were also last-minute cancellations, which prolonged the interview process. Moreover, as the projects were conducted during the post Covid-19 lockdown and since the interviewees, in most cases were seniors, for safety reasons they rejected to participate in the project, as pointed out by one of the students “*throughout all this I was thinking that we would not be able to*

¹ To preserve the authenticity of student voices, their responses have been quoted verbatim. Any grammatical or syntactic errors have not been corrected, and are indicated by [sic] where appropriate.

finish the project in time because two of our potential interviewees did not accept to be part of our interview because they had not been vaccinated” (R19).

The tasks of compiling interview questions and conducting the interview were also perceived to be challenging. As pointed out, *“the interview questions were one thing that I underestimated the most” (R59)*, and also *“it was hard, especially, when you did not know who the people that you were going to interview were” (R6)*. Moreover, the process of interviewing was *“like a roller-coaster ride of emotions” (R36)*. As this was their first experience, they reported to have felt stressed and nervous while conducting the first pilot-interviews. It also pushed the more introverted students out of their comfort zone, as suggested by the following *“I had to get out of my comfort zone which was challenging because I am not very sociable” (R48)*. In addition, they were aware that some of the topics were more sensitive, hence they felt afraid to ask certain questions or they spent a great deal of energy in writing appropriate questions. As pointed out by one of the students, *“Keeping in mind the sensitivity of our topic, writing questions that were respectful and not passing any boundaries was like walking in a minefield” (R20)*.

Technology and Video Post-production

Even though access to technology was not reported to have been an issue, not everyone had access to technology that was capable of capturing high quality images, videos and sounds. As a result, students were pushed to ask around for professional cameras and/or microphones or when they could not find support, they had to find creative solutions to their challenges, as illustrated by the following: *“we also didn’t have tools to set the cameras at the right height and keep them static. We improvised by getting books to calibrate the height” (R30)*.

Video post-production, on the other hand, *“cropping, synchronizing, editing, translating, and putting everything in place was the most challenging part” (R42)* of the project, in its last stages. 21 out of 64 students reported to have found post-production a challenging experience. As it was their first time working on a video production, *“we realized that we lacked the right skills for the editing” (R21)*, hence *“I took it upon myself to learn how to edit a video” (R31)*.

Moreover, making decisions about piecing together the raw footage, adding voiceover, sound and visual effects was reported to have been a “tiring” experience. The challenge was to tell a story in no more than four minutes. As one student stated: *“We had over 120-minutes worth of footage that we had to cut down to a 4-5 minute video” (R21)*. Deciding which footage to use was a challenge because *“every second of our videos seemed important to us so we had a really tough time trying to scope out the most interesting bits” (R56)*. Students also reported that paying attention to every detail, such as quality of the video, sound, subtitles, translation and so forth, was time consuming and required hard work for days, including late nights. This experience, which was also physically exhausting, taught one student to value the post-production process. In her words, *“my neck pain taught me to appreciate the film editors and their hard job” (R8)*.

Even though students faced these challenges, they found a way to overcome them and grow professionally: *“I just like to say that if it wasn’t for these challenges then I wouldn’t have been able to learn anything out of this project. So I do think that it is better that we had some challenges along the way so that we learn to like adopt” (I1)*.

OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the challenges described above, the student artifacts also revealed opportunities for engagement across multiple domains of learning.

Authentic Learning

Students reported to have never done an oral history project in the past. Hence, the entire journey was referred to as a “roller coaster” of emotions. Because the experience was new, students did not know what to expect: *“I had never been assigned a similar task in my years of academic studies, and the unfamiliarity of it all was overwhelming” (R20)*, or *“it looked like a marathon which required discipline and teamwork to finish it” (R48)*. The uncertainties caused fear: *“I was scared, I had the fear of failure haunting me like a ghost whenever I was” (R24)*. Just the idea of going outside the classroom to conduct interviews was an overwhelming experience for some of the students, while very exciting

for others. As one of the students pointed out, going to places to conduct interviews made her feel like a child in quest for information: *“I felt like a kid. Like Dora the Explorer [cartoon character]”* (I1).

Nevertheless, all students were appreciative of the experience: *“It was quite an amazing experience”* (I3), *“It was really a unique experience”* (R23) because they developed various skills such as *“critical thinking, creativity, video editing, group work and most importantly getting out of my comfort zone which was my weakness”* (R25). Getting out of the comfort zone also meant facing one’s fears, as it was the case with the student who *“overcame my fear of talking to new people a little bit”* (R42). The project created an opportunity for students to take upon various roles; *“we were team leaders, project managers, interviewers, video editors, presenters”* (R29), who learned how to collaborate, negotiate and establish working routines that ensured high quality work. In reflecting about her group’s working routine, one student stated *“sometimes we laughed, sometimes we were frustrated, but we always managed to collect ourselves and work on our tasks until we were satisfied with our work”* (R15).

Moreover, through this project, students had the opportunity to learn from seniors on subjects that they were otherwise unaware of, as suggested by the following: *“I was mesmerized by the stories my interviewees were telling, ... [it] made me grateful for what we have today”* (R39). Listening to stories that were part of students’ culture and history encouraged reflection too, as stated below:

“It made me reflect on my generation. How different everything is and how easy we have it now” (R16)

“...they were giving me hope and gratitude for my privileges and advantages in comparison to the lack of theirs” (R63)

In addition, students had the opportunity to showcase their video productions and present their topics in front of peers, professors and the community members at the annual student conference. This experience was perceived to have been *“very special”, “a great memory”, “enjoyable”, “most amazing”* because it gave them an opportunity to learn new things on topics that *“I haven’t been well educated before”* (CI24). Getting information on all sorts of topics from the past was an educational and enjoyable experience. For a student this experience felt like a journey to the past - *I felt like a time-traveller”* (CI40). Also, it was a great way for them to see *“the potential we all have and how much we tried in order for this conference to be as successful as possible”* (CI40). Having an audience to ask them questions made them feel valued for the work they have done, as suggested by the following *“[I] had all kinds of different questions and that made me feel important and like I did something”* (I1).

Despite the challenges and diligence, students were appreciative of the experience, as pointed out by a student: *“all the hard work and dedication that me and my teammates poured into this project felt very rewarding, especially the day of the conference, watching the presentations and the videos that my colleagues had prepared was a unique experience in itself and I feel like I left the meeting as a different person and gained new information and knowledge that I couldn’t acquire anywhere else”* (R18).

Moreover, the instructor’s guidance and support, combined with scaffolded teaching were perceived to have played a great role in the learning experience. *“Our professor provided us with various examples and gave us detailed reviews on the questions”* (R57) - hence, this approach helped students learn one thing at a time: how to write interview questions, how to give feedback, how to conduct interviews or what mistakes to avoid in video production. Though each task required students to be proactive and take charge of their own learning, it was through instructor’s support that *“we managed to get out of our comfort zone and get emotionally prepared”* (R25) and *“she always got our back and with her help we managed to do the task in the best way possible”* (R48).

In particular, students appreciated that they were not judged for their mistakes, but rather, they felt safe to share their challenges with her. As one student pointed out: *“the fact that you knew that for every single problem, she’s gonna have at least three possible solutions was very reassuring, like you felt safe”* (I3). The successful outcomes of the project were attributed to the supportive coaching, *“to be honest I do not think I could have managed to finish the project with my team by ourselves and the outcome to be as good as it was, not even close”* (R59).

Metacognitive knowledge

For many students, dwelling into the past was such an eye-opening experience as it taught them about *“my country's glorious history and culture”* (R5), it helped them *“learn more about the history of the past traditions in Kosovo”* (R2) but also, *“it made me have a different look and developed a much deeper appreciation for my country's history”* (R8). More importantly, students became aware that they lacked knowledge on Kosovo's recent history, and they were surprised to learn how rich its history, culture and traditions are. As a result, they became interested to go beyond the topic they were conducting their project and learn about other topics from the past. As one student stated:

“When I look back at the lack of my knowledge regarding [topic of investigation], I become aware of how little I am informed about our country and the hardships that it went through in historical years. This topic, definitely, urged me to seek out other happenings of our country, which are more than worthy to be flashed even on a daily basis” (R58).

The oral history experience increased students' metacognitive awareness. As they did not have any similar experience in the past, students were aware that they lacked certain skills to complete the project successfully. As a result, they generated specific strategies to overcome gaps. To find interviewees and/or identify a topic, they turned to their friends, peers, family and community members for support. This is the reason why one of the students commented: *“This project taught me that you can always find a way, and you do not have to find it alone. My group members, the professor, my family and friends, are all part of this project. It is as much theirs as it is mine”* (R12). Moreover, when the topic was too specific and interviewees were difficult to be allocated, students used social media to gain access to a larger community. Also, students found ways to modify interview questions by conducting in-depth research and *“connecting the dots with the results of the piloting phase”* (R58).

As video production was a new experience, students needed to acquire specific learning strategies to be able to produce their own video. To do so, they ended up watching videos on YouTube until they felt comfortable to proceed, or asked acquaintances to help out, such as the case of the student who was taught by a friend how to edit the video. As a result, *“I gained a new skill and was ready to tell my colleagues about it and start the editing”* (R31).

Student agency

Oral history project created a sense of pride for students who were trying to honor the memories of the elderly by sharing their stories with a wider community. As the experience was *“unique and something that reflects on the past of our country and our people...I am proud of myself”* (R47). In the process, they became aware how important their projects were in educating future generations on the country's past. Aware that *“interviewees will not be alive in the future but their story will be alive forever”* (R48), students felt a sense of pride to be the ones to share these stories with future generations, as suggested by a student: *“It is something that I look forward to showing my kids one day”* (R24). More importantly, the project made them feel *“empowered and accomplished”* (R15), and gave them the sense of responsibility and pride to share what they have learned with others *“I keep telling my friends and my little cousins about this story and I can see how their eyes light up with interest as they listen to me”* (R8). In addition, students developed a high level of accountability to present the stories in the most adequate way possible. They grew into responsible citizens who felt privileged and responsible to tell the stories and *“to deliver to the future generations a piece of history that needs to be talked more about”* (R15). The following quotes summarize this sense of responsibility:

“It was a way to give a voice to the women who had been silenced for so long.

A way to remind people that these awful events happened, and forgetting about them would not erase the pain” (R12)

“I realized how important it is not to just write a story but fight for the story to be shared, for the story to be told in order to help make an impact” (R14)

The sense of pride and accomplishment were noticeable during the conference, too. Students were proud not only for the accomplishments of their own team, but for everyone who had presented, because *“they did a great job [and] I learnt a lot of new stuff from our own history”* (CI19). Also, as

pointed out by a student: “*We left a trace in our country’s history*” (R33). Moreover, their work felt validated by supporting comments of other professors as part of the audience: “*Seeing my professors so proud of us made me feel like that was the reward for all the challenges and difficulties we had to go through*” (R45).

The project itself created opportunities for students to reflect on the present by listening to the stories from the past. As a result, students became aware of the privileges they enjoy today as a result of the hardship of their predecessors. As one of the students was interviewing her grandmother, she suddenly became aware how privileged she was to enjoy the right to education in her mother tongue. She stated: “*As she spoke I wanted to hug her, not only as her niece [sic], but as a student who owes her education to those teachers that endured all the hardships just to keep the education system in the Albanian language*” (R15). Another student, who explored the topic of elections against a regime, grew appreciation for people in the past for risking their lives to organise elections. As a result, she realised that she had “*underestimated the act of voting*” and only now realised that “*even one vote can make a big difference*” (R40). Furthermore, after listening to stories from the past, one student reflected: “*I am dedicated to my studies more than I have ever been before because now I am fully aware how lucky I am to be able to achieve my dream without going through the difficulties that our interviewees had to go*” (R43).

DISCUSSION

At their heart, oral histories are stories. Recent world events have led to an increasing scholarly interest in stories, whether as a form of expression or, more often, a source of evidence (Cruz & Grodziak, 2021). Narrative, or stories, has long played a role in the college classroom, but studies of narrative pedagogy often confine the scope of their study to the immediate student learning outcomes of the course(s) under study. For the present study, we have analyzed students’ stories about their experience with oral history. We found that the impact of these stories extended beyond the subject matter of the course or even the university experience.

The opportunity to meet and talk meaningfully to people from the community provided our students with an experience which enabled them to be more engaged citizens. They developed the sense of agency that they can give their contribution to the community (Adarlo, 2020). The stories they heard encouraged them to think of themselves as accountable for passing the oral tradition on to the future generations. In addition, this experience installed in them the feeling of appreciation and pride for being witnesses to the stories they had been unaware of. As a result, the unfamiliar things became familiar to them and this reflexive experience enabled them to move out of their comfort zone and examine previous beliefs (Adarlo, 2020).

Our results suggest that this oral history project contributed to the personal transformation of our students. Not being accustomed to being put in an independent learning setting in pre-university education, our students struggled with challenges that the project posed to them and the lack of skills to deal with them. In such circumstances they needed to become resourceful to overcome the complications they encountered. Rather than being guided solely by their instructors, the students found that the community itself (friends, family, neighbors) played a crucial role in facilitating their quest for knowledge regarding the past.

They also realized a role for themselves in relation to the past, curating, preserving and disseminating the history of their country in which they lived and worked. As a pedagogy, oral histories are inherently inclusive in their orientation. In other contexts, oral history has evolved into a tool of social justice, illuminating the past in the name of restorative justice (Augusto et al., 2020; Llewellyn et al., 2023), but for the citizens of Kosovo the meaning of their shared past remains an open question.

Working on oral history projects had an impact on students’ holistic language development. As pointed out by Lin (2009), when learning a second or foreign language, learners go beyond mere understanding of grammar and vocabulary; they gain “the ability to comprehend and use the language in real communication” (pp. 49-50). Throughout the process of conducting an oral history project, students were involved in a number of activities that enhanced language skills, such as brainstorming to generate project ideas, compiling interview questions, conducting, transcribing and translating interviews, writing the essay and the reflection as well as presenting their projects at the students’ annual conference. By writing narrative essays in English students not only acquired genre specific features but they also engaged in meaningful language use while deepening their intercultural understanding of

diverse perspectives and values. Moreover, this created an opportunity for them to build their personal voice in the foreign language and to make thoughtful decisions about language, tone, audience and emotional nuance. Additionally, telling their stories in English gave students more self-confidence and empowered them to take charge of the language. Finally, the oral history project enhanced student agency and ownership of language learning (Flórez González, 2018).

By translating oral histories students took part in a powerful process of linguistic and cultural mediation. They gained a greater understanding of the subtleties and depth of both languages as they explored the interaction between the linguistic codes of both target and mother languages (Lin, 2009), becoming thus aware of the differences, which subsequently equipped them with the skills to convey culturally particular ideas that lack clear English equivalents. This method cultivated a greater respect of their own background. By sharing historical or personal narratives in English and subtitling video projects, students did more than just translate words; they also conveyed feelings, values, and collective memories, hence considering themselves as bridge builders between the two cultures, rather than mere language learners (Winkel & Strachan, 2020).

In addition, while working on oral history projects students engaged in identity construction: beyond their role as EFL learners, they expressed their evolving identities as multilingual, socially conscious and knowledgeable individuals, able to construct meaning from their experiences and present their culture and identity in both written and spoken English (Ariza, 2007; Norton, 2006).

The instructor's direction and assistance, which enabled students to successfully complete each project step using a scaffolded method, were essential to their success. Their intellectual and personal development was facilitated by the safe environment in which they could make mistakes and get helpful criticism. Students ultimately gained a sense of success and a renewed respect for learning outside of the traditional classroom as a result of the project's obstacles, which served as stepping stones for their professional and personal growth (Ritchie, 2003).

Due to their inexperience and equipment restrictions, students encountered considerable difficulties with technology and video editing. It was challenging to condense a lot of raw material into a four-minute video, necessitating the careful selection of the most powerful scenes. The process was tiresome and time-consuming. Notwithstanding these difficulties, many saw the experience as a worthwhile chance for flexibility, problem-solving, and career advancement. Ultimately, these difficulties aided students in gaining resilience and critical skills (Anderson and Hamilton in Truong-White, 2016).

Students gained a better understanding of their learning process and abilities as a result of the oral history project. They identified their weaknesses and, with the help of friends, family, and the community, discovered strategies to close them. They employed a variety of techniques to conduct interviews and produce movies, including internet research, developing interview questions, and learning video editing from tutorials or peer assistance. Along with imparting useful skills, this experience promoted perseverance and cooperation. By demonstrating to the students that obstacles can be overcome with planning, creativity, and teamwork, the initiative ultimately gave them the confidence to take control of their learning (Little et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of oral history in the development of students' sense of active citizenship and transversal skills. It has demonstrated that engaging with oral history is a powerful way to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world application while fostering students' research, communication and critical thinking skills. In their roles as witnesses to the lived experiences, students developed a sense of responsibility towards preservation of history and civic engagement.

The findings show that the experience with oral history has transformed students from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants through reflective and experiential ways of learning. In this process they have developed empathy, flexibility and a deeper understanding of social and cultural complexities as they navigate the methodological and ethical challenges involved in the collection and interpretation of oral histories. Furthermore, while engaged in this process students have gained a sense of agency, confidence and skills to make significant contributions to public discourse.

Finally, the incorporation of oral history in educational curricula can have a sustainable impact. Oral history helps students develop the skills and mindset needed for lifelong learning and engaged citizenship by encouraging a closer connection to history and their communities. The integration of oral

history in curricula enables educators to create learning environments in which students develop transversal skills and become inspired to act as active contributors to society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In considering the multiple benefits of oral history in teaching and learning, it is recommended that oral history becomes an integral part of teaching in social sciences, including civic education and history. Its interactive approach encourages students to develop not only 21st century skills, but also their civic responsibility, by linking the past to present-day issues. Through such initiatives, students can develop resilience and the confidence to lead future initiatives.

To explore further the benefits and challenges of integrating oral history in teaching, more research is needed. In particular, to investigate the development of 21st century skills, resilience and active citizenship, more longitudinal research should be conducted. This would allow researchers to gain better insights on the impact oral history projects have on students' academic performance, community leadership and sense of agency.

REFERENCES

- Adarlo, G. M. (2020) Service-learning as global citizenship education: Acting locally on global challenges and concerns. // *IAFOR Journal of Education: Undergraduate Education* 8(3)
- Alsied, S. M., & Ibrahim, N. W. (2018) Exploring challenges encountered by EFL Libyan learners in research teaching and writing. // *IAFOR Journal of Language Learning*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.22492/ijll.3.2.06>
- Ariza, D. (2007) Culture in the EFL classroom at Universidad de la Salle: An innovation project. // *Actualidades Pedagógicas*, 50, 9-17.
- Augusto, G., Hogan, W., & Mason-Hogans, D. (2022) Adapting critical oral history methodology to freedom movement studies. // *The Oral History Review*, 49(2), 251-282.
- Baildon, B. & Blackburn, K. (2012) Research into practice: Tuning in to the "Chorus of History" through the use of oral history in the classroom. // *HSSE Online* 1(1), 50-53.
- Carmona, J. F., & Bernal, D. D. (2012) Oral histories in the classroom. // *Creating Solidarity across Diverse Communities: International Perspectives in Education*, 114-130.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018) *Research Design - qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Cruz, L. E., & Grodziak, E. M. (2021) SOTL under stress: Rethinking teaching and learning scholarship during a global pandemic. // *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 9(1), 3-13.
- Ehlman, K., Ligon, M., Moriello, G., Welleford, E. A., & Schuster, K. (2011) Oral history in the classroom: A comparison of traditional and online gerontology classes. // *Educational Gerontology*, 37(9), 772-790.
- Foulis, E. (2018) Participatory pedagogy: Oral history in the service-learning classroom. // *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 22(3), 119-134.
- Flórez González, A. M. (2018) Strengthening local identity by writing chronicles in the EFL classroom. // *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 20(2), 185-195. <https://doi.org/10.14483/22487085.13121>
- González-Pérez, L. I., & Ramírez-Montoya, M. S. (2022) Components of Education 4.0 in 21st century skills frameworks: systematic review. // *Sustainability*, 14(3), 1493.
- Iucu, R. B., & Marin, E. (2014) Authentic learning in adult education. // *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* (142), 410-415 DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.702
- Jonassen, D., Howland, J., Marra, R.M., & Crismond, D. (2008) *Meaningful Learning with Technology* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Lai, C., & Li, G. (2011) Technology and task-based language teaching: A critical review. // *CALICO Journal*, 28, 1-24.
- Leavy P. (2011) *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press
- Llewellyn, K. R., & Ng-A-Fook, N. (Eds.). (2017) *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices*. Springer.
- Llewellyn, K. R., Llewellyn, J., Roberts-Smith, J., Morrison d, G., Smith, T., Dorrington-

- Skinner, T., & DOHR Team. (2023)**
Lin, L. F. (2009) Second language learners' identity toward their home culture: Adding pragmatic knowledge to language learning curriculum. // *Asian Social Science*, 5(8), 43-51. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v5n8p43>
- Little, D., Dam, L., & Legenhausen, L. (2017)** *Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice and Research*. Multilingual Matters.
- Norton, B. (2006)** Identity as a sociocultural construct in second language education. In K. Cadman & K. O'Regan (Eds.), *TESOL in Context* [Special Issue], 22-33.
- Nunan, D. (2004)** *Task-based Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunes, C. (2019)** “Connecting to the ideologies that surround us”: Oral history stewardship as an entry point to critical theory in the undergraduate classroom. // *The Oral History Review*.
- Portelli, A. (2009)** What makes oral history different? in Luisa Del Giudice (Ed.), *Oral history, Oral culture, and Italian Americans* (22). Palgrave MacMillan
- Pitchford, A., Owen, D., & Stevens, E. (2021)** *A Handbook for Authentic Learning in Higher Education: Transformational Learning Through Real World Experiences*. Routledge.
- Quah, C. Y., & Ng, K. H. (2022)** A systematic literature review on digital storytelling authoring tool in education: January 2010 to January 2020. // *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 38(9), 851-867.
- Ritchie, D. A. (2003)** *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Schenck, M. C., & Wetzel, J. M. (2022)** Shifting the means of (knowledge) production: teaching applied Oral history methods in a global classroom. // *World History Connected*, 19(3).
- Taskeen, S., Shehzadi, A., Khan, T., & Saleem, N. (2014)** Difficulties faced by novice researchers: A study of universities in Pakistan. // *International Journal of Art and Literature* 1(1): 1-4.
- Ting, N. C. (2013)** Classroom video project: An investigation on students' perception. // *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 90, 441–448. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.07.113
- Truong-White, H. (2016)** *Oral History Education: Telling Tales in Schools: Oral History Education, Political Engagement, and Youth*. Self-published.
- Van Lier, L. (2008)** Agency in the Classroom. In JP Lantolf, & ME Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural Theory and the Teaching of Second Languages*. Equinox.
- Winkel, C., & Strachan, L. (2020)** Through the eyes of a woman: Using oral history to explore the enigmatic world of Saudi Arabia's female population. // *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21(6), 83-100.