A STARTALK Guide to Planning a Purposeful Field Trip

“I really enjoyed the field trips, though they were not very helpful in developing the language.”

“The field trips were fun but not very beneficial to my learning experience. I think they should be left in the program but maybe tweaked to add more of a learning experience to the class.”

— Comments by STARTALK students on field trips

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Introduction

World language program administrators and teachers should expect students to benefit from every aspect of their programs, including field trips, which are learning experiences organized for a group of students with a specific purpose outside the usual environment of a classroom. Due to the intensive and short-term nature of STARTALK\(^1\) programs, which on average are two or three weeks long, it is especially important that every program activity—including field trips—contributes clearly to learning. For a program that is two or three weeks long, if one day of instruction is used for a field trip, that accounts for one-tenth to one-fifteenth of the total program time. Additionally, a poorly-conducted field trip can waste a substantial portion of a program’s limited resources. However, comments like those quoted above suggest that the academic benefits of field trips have not always been clear to learners.

This situation makes it compelling for STARTALK programs to seek ways to maximize the value of their field trips. This need has prompted STARTALK researchers to review existing information about the characteristics of successful field trips both from the literature and from STARTALK program data. Our goal is to provide guidance to future STARTALK programs in designing and implementing meaningful field trips for their students.

This paper seeks to answer the following three questions:

1. What have been the goals, types, and characteristics of STARTALK field trips?
2. What does existing literature reveal about field trips? How can STARTALK field trips benefit from the findings of this literature?
3. Considering the data and information from the answers to questions 1 and 2, what steps should STARTALK programs take in order to design and implement more effective field trips?

To answer these questions, we set out to learn how many STARTALK student programs included a field trip in their curricula, what types of field trips they organized, and what the students’ responses were to those field trips. We then conducted a literature review on educational field trips in general and on foreign language field trips in particular. Drawing on information from the STARTALK data and the literature review, we propose a framework for world language field trips and delineate curricular and logistical considerations for conducting a successful field trip.

We note two important aspects regarding the scope of this paper. First, this paper only focuses on field trips in student programs. Although some STARTALK teacher programs conducted field trips, the nature, purposes, and logistical considerations of those teacher field trips were vastly different from those for K–12 students addressed in this paper. Second, this paper does not address study abroad programs, which may be considered a kind of extended field trip, but are outside the scope of current STARTALK programs.

\(^1\) STARTALK is a Presidential Initiative to fund summer intensive programs in critical languages including Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Hindi, Persian, Portuguese, Turkish, Russian, Swahili, and Urdu. The National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland is the administrator of the STARTALK project. For more information, visit startalk.umd.edu.
Data Collection and Analysis

STARTALK field trip data come from the written curricula and final reports submitted by directors of STARTALK student programs and post-program surveys conducted by STARTALK. STARTALK researchers also developed selection criteria, ways of categorizing information, and procedures of data review and analysis.

By reviewing the curricula and final reports, we gathered information about (1) the names and number of programs that conducted field trips, (2) the destinations of field trips, (3) the goals and objectives of field trips, and (4) the description of field trip activities, if any. Because the STARTALK curriculum template and reporting instrument did not require programs to provide details about field trips or their follow-ups, the information gleaned for this report was limited. Nonetheless, some interesting patterns across programs emerged as a result of this review.

By analyzing the post-program surveys, we gathered information about students’ satisfaction with field trips. Responses to the post-program survey are represented in a Likert scale with four levels: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Two questions, one on students’ satisfaction with the complete program and one on their satisfaction levels with the field trips, were analyzed for the purpose of this paper. Responses were collected anonymously.

Findings and Discussion

Three important patterns emerge regarding the nature, types, and educational values of field trips conducted by STARTALK student programs.

1. More than half of STARTALK student programs conducted field trips.

Percentages of STARTALK programs that conducted field trips in 2008, 2009, and 2010 are shown in Figure 1 (below).

Figure 1: Self-Reported Field Trip Figures from STARTALK Programs from 2008–2010
The 2008 data show that 33 out of 52 (63.4 percent) programs self-reported at least one field trip as part of their programs. Forty-five out of 77 (58.7 percent) programs in 2009 and 61 out of 83 (75.9 percent) programs in 2010 self-reported having a field trip. Since reporting field trips is not required by STARTALK, there might be other programs that conducted a field trip, but chose to not report it. Therefore, the percentage of programs that actually conducted a field trip might be higher than the numbers reported here.

2. The majority of programs focused on offering students an immersive and cultural experience.

The analyses of program curricula and final reports did not yield much information on the goals and objectives of the field trips or other details about them; instead, we found that most of the programs described their field trips in terms of the destination of the field trip. Figure 2 (below) shows the destinations of field trips for STARTALK programs from 2008 to 2010.

Figure 2: Locations or Destinations of STARTALK Field Trips

As Figure 2 shows, among the programs that self-reported organizing field trips, almost all of them chose physical sites such as local ethnic communities (37 percent), restaurants (23 percent), religious sites (13 percent), or museums (13 percent). Charlestown High School Arabic students, for example, had field trips to a local mosque, a Middle Eastern restaurant, and an open-air market where Arabic was regularly used. The DePaul University Chinese program organized a field trip to Chicago’s Chinatown neighborhood, where students could dine, shop, converse with native speakers, and have a scavenger hunt. The rest of the programs (14 percent) visited other places such as businesses, nature centers, embassies, and research institutes. For example, Arabic and Chinese students at the Chicago Public School Program visited an international corporation that had business partnerships with Arabic-speaking countries and China. Students at Global Village Academy visited the National Institute for Standards and Technology and the National Energy Research Lab as part of the course’s focus on learning physical science through Chinese. Among the programs that offered “other” categories, only one program mentioned a virtual field trip (see “Expanding Types and Range of Field Trips,” below).
3. Students were less satisfied with field trips than with programs.
Feedback regarding students’ satisfaction with the programs compared to their levels of satisfaction with the field trips was obtained through the analysis of the post-program survey. For this analysis, data from the 2007 through 2010 surveys were used. Figure 3 illustrates the percentages of participants who chose either Strongly Agree or Agree for the following two survey questions that were included as part of the 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 STARTALK post-program student surveys: “Learning a language during the summer was a good experience” and “The field trips we took were helpful for my language learning.”

Figure 3: Overall Satisfaction (Strongly Agree and Agree) with Program Compared to Field Trips

Figure 3 shows that for four consecutive years, while overall ratings of satisfaction with learning the languages tended to be high (averaging 93 percent and above), there has consistently been a 10–20 percent difference between program satisfaction and field trip satisfaction. This lower satisfaction rate indicates that students did not necessarily find the field trips as beneficial to their language learning.

So far, we have explained the rationale of this paper and reported on the findings obtained from STARTALK program data review and analyses. The findings suggest that, while a majority of STARTALK student programs offered field trips, the consistently lower satisfaction rate for field trips compared with the programs, point to the need for better guidance on how to conduct meaningful and purposeful field trips. In order to provide that guidance, we now examine what research reveals about successful field trips and what field trips can contribute to student learning.
Review of Research on Field Trips

The benefits of field trips have been researched by educators in different content areas. Research has shown that field trips are important for enhancing K–12 students' learning in science (Davidson, Passmore, & Anderson, 2009), language arts (von Zastrow, 2010), and other academic and non-academic skills (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Neill, 2008). Advantages of learning through a field trip are summarized in the following paragraph.

First, field trips provide opportunities for experiential learning (Davidson et al., 2009; Nabors, Edwards, & Murray, 2009). Students learn and remember facts and concepts more effectively if these facts and concepts are rooted in events that they have actively experienced. Second, field trips can help develop learners’ motivation and interest (Nabors et al., 2009). It has long been established in psychology and education that motivated learners are more willing to take an active role in the learning process and achieve higher performance (Irwin, 1961). Third, field trips can also help learners to connect their knowledge, skills, and learning to the real world. As Davidson et al. (2009) argue, “A number of research studies suggest that students tend to compartmentalize their learning and fail to make connections between subjects or between classroom and ‘real-world’ events unless explicitly led to these links” (Davidson et al., 2009).

On the other hand, research has also revealed that beneficial field trips require careful planning. Field trip planning generally requires two components: curricular planning and logistical planning (Davidson et al., 2009; Martin & Seevers, 2003; Nabors et al., 2009). Curricular planning sets the learning goal of a field trip, determines its content, and integrates content and real-life experiences. It involves planning pre-, during-, and post-trip activities based on national standards (Nabors et al., 2009) and integrating the field trip with the rest of the curriculum. Logistical planning, on the other hand, addresses administrative issues such as health, safety, oversight, scheduling, and site coordination. Both types of planning have been identified as essential components of an effective field trip.

In contrast with the many reports on the benefits of field trips in the field of general education, research on field trips in the field of world language education is sparse. Almost all of the research in the world language field has been on study abroad programs (e.g., Barron, 2003; Davidson, 2010; Dekeyser, 2010; Freed, 1995; Goodman, 2009; Martinsen, 2010; Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2002; also see a 2010 Foreign Language Annals special issue on language learning and study abroad). This research, unfortunately, has little relevance to the scope of this paper.

In summary, previous research on field trips show that field trips can be beneficial for learning. The scholarship emphasizes integrating the field trip with the rest of the curriculum and planning pre-, during, and post-trip activities, and it provides useful information on general logistical planning for all types of field trips that can be applicable to world language field trips.

At the same time, gaps exist in the current literature. In particular, there is a lack of specific information on field trips for world languages, and there is a need for a framework for conceptualizing and planning meaningful field trips that meet the local and national standards.
In order to answer our last question about how STARTALK programs can improve the design and implementation of their field trips, this paper now moves on to propose a standards-based approach to designing, organizing, and implementing field trips for learners of world languages.

Proposing a Standards-Based Framework for Field Trips
A well-designed field trip, however short, can provide opportunities for world language students to experience the target language, culture, and community in a real-world setting. Such tasks can provide immersion experiences for students, engage students in communication, enhance students’ learning skills, and, most importantly, bring learning to life.

The literature review shows that field trips provide valuable experiential learning opportunities for students, particularly when they are planned carefully with clear goals and objectives based on standards. In light of the fact that the “National Standards for Foreign Language Education” developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) addresses important dimensions of world language learning, it is reasonable to ensure that field trips are based on these standards.

Addressing the Five C’s
Using the Five C’s of the national standards of foreign language learning—communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities—as an overarching framework in field trip planning can help educators more effectively conceptualize the goals, objectives, and content of a field trip as well as the particular activities associated with it. Within this framework, we also provide ideas and examples drawn from STARTALK programs to illustrate how the ACTFL Standards can be incorporated into field trips.

Communication
Activities in a field trip can be designed for students to engage in each of the three modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational. Students can be assigned specific projects in which they incorporate what they learned through different phases of the field trip. As an example of the interpretive mode of communication, students could prepare for the field trip by working with target-language texts such as flyers, advertisements, pictures, stories, or articles related to the field trip. They could listen to an audio recording or watch a video in the target language about the field trip site or the aspect of the language and culture they will be interacting with during the field trip. While reading, listening, and viewing, they should be actively engaged in activities that prepare them for the field trip. Based on their age and proficiency levels, specific communicative tasks can be designed to engage them in meaningful interpersonal communication during the field trip. They could interview target-language speakers at the field trip site and take notes. They could use a worksheet to do scavenger hunts; to record signs, places, and objects; or to take observational notes. Records and notes from such a field trip could be incorporated in post-trip activities. For example, students could compare and summarize the notes among peers and make presentations about their field trip experiences. It is important that these post-field trip activities serve as a review, comprehension check, and assessment of students’ learning outcomes.

Cultures
Similarly, specific tasks and activities can help students notice, observe, and gain new insights about products and practices common in cultures that speak the target language, as well as their own culture. Learners could be encouraged to observe and make notes of cultural artifacts, different ways of interacting with one another, customs and taboos, or culturally appropriate behaviors in the target culture.
and compare those with their own. For example, a field trip could be designed so that students become guests of an ethnic community center. Before going on such a field trip, the class could discuss or brainstorm in pairs or groups how greeting and hospitality practices reflect cultural perspectives related to the roles of hosts and guests. Students should behave accordingly during the meal or cultural gathering and report back to the class about their experiences and new cultural insights.

Connections
If time and location allow, students can explore connections to other fields of knowledge through their field trip experience. For example, students who are visiting a zoo for their field trip could make a list of the animals found in the target-language region. After the field trip, they could do some research about the geography and climate of the region and how those factors influence the lives of these animals. Or, they could do research as a pre-field trip activity, then conduct an investigation at the zoo, and finally write and report on their findings and experiences as a post-field trip activity.

Comparisons
A field trip can allow students to compare the target language and culture with their own. Specific tasks and activities could be designed to deepen the understanding of similarities and differences between different languages and cultures. For example, students on a field trip to a traditional ethnic market or a restaurant could make a Venn diagram noting the similarities and differences between what the atmosphere of restaurants or markets is like in their field trip experience compared with their own cultures.

Community
Most of all, the field trip experience can help students connect with the target-language communities in a meaningful way. For example, during a visit to an ethnic neighborhood or a community center, students could interview native speakers about their lives here in the United States and in their home country. Later, during the post-trip session, they could share what they found most interesting about the story of the person they interviewed. This experience could help students develop a deeper understanding of the target-language community in the United States. Ethnic fairs, concerts, or markets are other venues that allow students to observe the communities and connect to them.

These are just a few examples of how the national standards can be Incorporated in a field trip. Each field trip is unique in terms of its destination, group of students, and other circumstances, and thus each brings rich opportunities to provide experiential learning to students by addressing the five C’s.

Ideally, a field trip should allow, encourage, or motivate students to engage in real-life communicative tasks, explore the target culture in a meaningful way, compare the target language and culture with their own, reinforce the knowledge students have already acquired about the target culture and society, gain knowledge about content to which they would otherwise not have access, and build or extend connections with the target-language community. Above all, it should help students personalize their learning and their connection to the target language, cultures, and communities.

Setting the Goals and Objectives
As observed in the data analysis section in figure 2, most programs describe their field trips in terms of destination instead of goals and objectives. However, having clear goals and objectives is important in measuring the outcomes of the field trips and student learning. Instead of being a stand-alone activity,
field trips should be part of the curriculum, and the goals and objectives of the field trip should align with the larger curricular goals. For example, the curricular theme of the STARTALK program in Cape Henlopen School District was the ocean, so the program took the students to the Seaside Nature Center. The program described the goals of the field trip in terms of “can-do” statements related to the theme so that the outcome of students’ learning could be assessed effectively. By starting with clear goals and objectives a program is better equipped to design meaningful and engaging activities for students to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

Expanding the Types and Range of Field Trips
As shown in Figure 2 (see above), most STARTALK programs visited physical sites such as ethnic neighborhoods, restaurants, religious sites, or museums. However, in this day and age, when technology is readily available even though time, money, and other resources may not be, it may be important to expand the notion of the field trip and explore other possibilities in terms of destinations, modalities, and resources. Though taking students to a real field trip site is an excellent learning opportunity, if the field trip is designed and planned thoughtfully, in some instances the location of a program, the budget, or other logistical considerations do not allow the program to have a traditional field trip to a physical site. In such circumstances, simulated and virtual field trips represent good alternatives to physical field trips. In what follows, we briefly explain what each type of field trip entails.

Physical Field Trip
In a physical field trip, students visit an actual field trip site and interact with people from the target culture who know and speak the target language. This is the traditional and most common way of conducting a field trip.

Simulated Field Trip
In a simulated field trip, instead of taking students to the actual field trip site, the site is created for them according to the purpose and goals of the field trip. For example, ethnic fairs, restaurants, exhibits, markets, science camps, concerts, or sports events can be organized for students at the program site, and speakers of the target language can be invited to come in and interact with the learners, either as themselves or in roles. Typically, a rule is established that learners must speak only the target language until the simulation is over. Virginia Commonwealth University and the Virginia Department of Education conducted simulated field trips by organizing an international market and the Olympic games in their STARTALK Arabic and Chinese programs; these events were not described in the curriculum or report but observed at the site visits.

Virtual Field Trip
In a virtual field trip, students visit certain designated websites and have the field trip experience online. For example, Arlington Public Schools conducted a virtual field trip in which students identified and learned about a tourist site. Such a field trip allows a program to tap into the resources that the digital age can provide. Websites of museums, cities, clubs, and cultural organizations can be used for field trip purposes; it is also possible to use a game with avatars who speak the target language, such as in Second Life. However, it is very important to note that a virtual field trip should be a well-organized learning experience for students, with clear goals and objectives, not just an opportunity for them to browse the Internet or play games.
Whether the program decides to take students to local ethnic communities, to create a simulated flea market for them, or to plan a virtual field trip, good field trip planning requires serious curricular and logistical considerations.

Planning and Implementing a Field Trip

In light of the findings on field trips from STARTALK student programs and from the relevant literature, we will now turn to the essential curricular and logistical planning that will help ensure the effectiveness of a field trip. We turn first to curricular planning.

Curricular Considerations

Planning a field trip that is purposeful; has measurable outcomes; integrates curriculum, instruction, and assessment; promotes real-life applications of classroom learning; and allows students to personalize their connection to the target language and culture requires thoughtful curricular planning.

Identify Purpose, Goals, and Focus

While a field trip can be culture- or content-focused, or a mixture of both, identifying the focus of the field trip in advance is important to make the field trip an organized learning experience for students. Regardless of the destination, the focus of the field trip should be defined in terms of the national standards. In addition, clear goals and measurable objectives should be described as “can-do” statements to assess students’ learning outcome.

Integrate Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Instead of being a stand-alone activity, the field trip should be an integral part of the curriculum and assessment. By considering strategies of instruction and assessment that can be embedded in the planning, execution, and follow-up stages of a field trip, the link between classroom learning and out-of-classroom learning in a field trip can be made more concrete.

Plan Meaningful Activities

Once the goals, purpose, and focus of the field trip are identified, specific activities should be planned to help students achieve those goals. It is important to design activities that are appropriate for students according to their age, experience, and proficiency level. All modalities of children’s learning, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, can also be addressed while planning activities.

Pre-Trip Activities

The field trip should be preceded by advanced organizer activities. If the students are well prepared and understand the purpose of the field trip, it is more likely that they will be motivated to participate in the activities planned for them during the field trip. Pre-trip activities can also be used to familiarize students with the field trip site and with the people with whom they would be interacting during the trip, as well as to practice the types of communication that they might need to employ.

During-Trip Activities

In light of the goals of the field trip and logistical considerations, activities should be planned thoughtfully to engage students during the field trip. Since a primary goal of any field trip is to immerse the students in the target language and culture, guidelines to that effect need to be established in advance. There will be need to set time aside for debriefing in English, but the language of study should be used for
90 percent or more of the time of the trip from the beginning until the end. Efforts should be made to ensure that the field trip is not only fun but also a learning experience for students. It is important to make sure that students participate in planned activities. The goals of the field trip should be communicated to students to inform them about what they are expected to do during the field trip. Students should be expected to engage in meaningful communicative tasks designed with clear goals. Students should also be encouraged to interact with and learn from each other during the field trip.

**Post-Trip Activities**

Follow-up or post-field trip activities should be planned to reinforce and assess what the students have gained from the field trip experience. Follow-up activities will also provide opportunities to collect evidence to evaluate the extent to which the students developed an understanding of the content of the field trip.

**Logistical Considerations**

While thoughtful curricular planning is essential to make the field trip a learning experience for students, careful logistical planning is also essential to ensure that the field trip experience is positive for everyone involved. Logistical planning is also important because the curricular goals of the field trip can only be achieved if everything goes as planned. Logistical planning can be divided into the following sections based on key considerations.

**Support the Curricular Plan**

Before planning the details of the field trip, it is essential to consider the learning goals for the students and to select a site that will help students reach those goals. The organizers of the field trip should choose a site with the capacity to accommodate the number of students expected to participate in the field trip. If possible, they should visit the site prior to the planned date to see if it will be suitable for the program’s needs, and they should begin to think about activities that will be possible there. Once a site is selected, a date should be set allowing enough time for pre-field trip planning and preparations. A detailed trip schedule should be developed accordingly. It is useful to obtain a map of the site and to plan the time to be spent in each destination. It is also important to make good arrangements for transportation and meals, if necessary. If the field trip involves individuals from outside of the program, such as site personnel, guides, or community members, the role of those individuals should be identified in advance. It is a good idea to contact these collaborators and relate the plan to them, with a schedule along with the needs of the program, the goals of the field trip, and what is expected of them in order to avoid any confusion during the field trip.

**Address Administrative and Legal Issues**

Before the field trip, it is important to make sure that all legal and administrative considerations are addressed in accordance with the system the program works with, such as obtaining administrative approval, obtaining parental permissions, and collecting fees.

**Ensure Health and Safety**

Taking the health and safety of the participants into account is very important while planning a field trip. First aid supplies should be packed and emergency contact information should be obtained from parents. Arrangements for students with special needs should be made and information should be obtained from parents regarding allergies and medications. There should be enough adult chaperones. To ensure the safety of students, they should be given name tags and paired with “buddies” to stay with during the field trip.
trip. If possible, site chaperones should be arranged and a “safe spot” and person on-site should be designated in case students get separated. Behavior expectations should be developed and discussed with all participants beforehand.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reported that more than half of the STARTALK student programs have conducted field trips. Students’ general levels of satisfaction with field trips, however, has been consistently lower than their overall satisfaction with the programs. Our literature review revealed that well-designed field trips can improve students’ learning experience as well as their motivation, retention of knowledge, and skills. Thoughtful curricular and logistical planning are essential to make the field trip meaningful, fun, and safe. This planning needs to include pre-fieldtrip learning and post-trip follow-up so that the trip is correctly perceived as part of the overall curriculum.

We also proposed a framework based on the national standards for planning and implementing field trips that have clear goals and objectives are tied to curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and engage students in meaningful ways during all three phases of the field trip. We also addressed considerations for logistical planning, such as supporting the curricular plan, administrative and legal issues, and health and safety. In order for STARTALK and other world language programs to use the information provided in the proposed framework, STARTALK has developed a field trip planning template, which is included in the Appendix. This template addresses both curricular and logistical considerations. We welcome STARTALK and other world language programs to use this template and to provide us with feedback and suggestions.
References


