



Confronting Issues In Irish-Medium Immersion Teacher Education Research Through Technology-Enhanced Language Learning

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Abstract

Teachers in Irish-medium immersion (IMI) education are professionally charged with making academic content comprehensible to students learning through a minority or second language. It is necessary therefore for the IMI teacher to be a proficient user of the Irish language and display a broad range of advanced linguistic skills and competences e.g. lexicon, grammar, semantics, sociolinguistics. This paper reports on qualitative research conducted on a Masters of Education in Irish-medium Immersion Education Programme (An M. Oid. san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge). This blended learning postgraduate programme aims to develop an essential knowledge-base, deep understandings and key competencies so as to enable students to fulfil this complex and dynamic role as IMI educators. An attempt was made to deploy online strategies (asynchronous and synchronous content delivery) to support language learning and to generate online tasks (language learning blogs, wikis, discussion fora, online collaborative glossary) to enable language use and enrichment, interaction, professional dialogue, critical thinking and learning. An underlying aim of task design was to enhance language awareness and knowledge about language learning. This study tapped into the lived experiences of eight postgraduate students, all of whom were Irish-medium immersion teachers. Qualitative data were collected from a variety of sources e.g. online survey, student feedback, module questionnaires and focus groups to assess the impact of the blended approach and online task design on students' perceptions of their language learning experiences. Findings suggest that the collaborative nature of online interaction in Irish was central to developing students' linguistic resources in Irish. Through engaging with new language in this blended learning programme, students became more language aware and language informed and this language awareness positively impacted on communicative online language ability. Findings from this research study also enhances our understanding of how to craft a dual focus coherent online pedagogy which simultaneously unpacks and enriches both programme content and associated language.

1. Introduction

Content driven programmes such as language immersion programmes, i.e. programmes in which content is taught through a non-native or second language (L2), have become increasingly popular across the globe. Notwithstanding their increased popularity and relative success when it comes to second language development, language immersion programmes remain complex to implement and not always as successful as what we would hope them to be (Cavanagh & Cammarata, 2015; Lyster & Tedick, 2014). Among all the challenges these varied programmes face, research indicates that the primary issue lies in the difficulty to create well-balanced programmes where both content instruction and language/literacy instruction are targeted simultaneously (e.g., Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Lyster, 2007; Ó Ceallaigh, 2013). Thus, the challenges linked to language development and/or content mastery faced by students in immersion programmes can be partly attributed to insufficient attention being paid to either the teaching of content, language or literacy skills as well as insufficient knowledge on how to effectively target these three dimensions all at once at the curricular and instructional level. These challenges are further compounded by immersion teacher deficiency in the immersion language (Ó Ceallaigh, 2013; Ó Grádaigh, 2014).

While immersion programmes continue to evolve in ways that incorporate relevant research findings about effective instructional practices, this evolution appears compromised due to the inadequate and insufficient provision of effective initial teacher education (ITE) and continuous professional development (CPD) programmes in the field. In most international contexts, a qualification in elementary education, which focuses mainly on teaching content, is deemed sufficient by state requirements to teach in an immersion setting. The Republic of Ireland is no different. In Ireland, immersion teacher credentials parallel those of non-immersion teachers even though research consistently highlights how the specific needs of teachers in Irish-medium contexts are not being met

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by current provision in ITE (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Máirtín, 2006; Ó Ceallaigh, 2013; Ó Duibhir, 2009; Ó Grádaigh, 2014).

2. Reconceptualising immersion teacher education through blended learning

IMI education is normally provided to students for whom Irish is not their first language (L1) in schools known as *Gaelscoileanna*. Currently 7.5% of elementary school children attend one of the 144 IMI schools in the Republic of Ireland (Kavanagh, 2014). Given the lack of a critical mass of IMI teachers and a relatively small number of IMI schools nationally, there is a need to ensure that CPD provision does not become lost in general teacher education in Ireland. Concurrently addressing content, language and literacy development through their students' L2 requires significant ITE and CPD (Lyster & Tedick, 2014). It would appear therefore that immersion teachers require an essential knowledge-base, deep understandings and key competencies beyond those required in ordinary mainstream classrooms (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Lyster, 2007; Ó Ceallaigh, 2013).

A blended distance learning approach was chosen to meet the CPD needs of a dispersed IMI teacher population in Ireland. Blended learning may be defined as a hybrid model of learning which combines traditional face-to-face and computer-mediated teaching approaches. A blended learning design can not only bridge geographic distances and decrease costs but it also allows for increased access and convenience (Stein & Graham, 2014). Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) encourages students to seek linguistic information in input, assess it in relation to their own emerging linguistic knowledge base, share it collaboratively through production-based tasks and, ultimately, transform it into their own rule-based and formulaic L2 knowledge (Dawley, 2007; Tanveer, 2011). A blended learning approach to L2 learning not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also promotes autonomous, self-directed learning and learner motivation (Banditvilai, 2016). An attempt was made to weave together asynchronous and synchronous interactions to supplement and transform the learning process. A purposeful programme design process provided a clear path to simultaneously unpack programme content and promote language learning and enrichment.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study examined the following research question:

- What do students consider to be the major benefits to language learning in a blended learning programme?

IMI teachers with at least five years of teaching experience in immersion programmes took part in this research study. Participants (N=8), each assigned a pseudonym, had completed seven modules (one year) of the two year postgraduate programme. Students identified specific areas of development in relation to their own competences in Irish at the outset of the programme, e.g. technical and academic language register associated with research and linguistics. To address the issues identified by students in the online needs analysis survey, the following repertoire of online learning activities were designed.

Table 1: Outline of Online Activities and associated learning outcome

Activity	Description	Learning Outcome
Online Language Glossary	The content of the glossary was determined by the students based on their own exploration of both research and linguistics literature.	Develop students' lexicon of programme-related terminology
Discussion Forums	Course content was posted to a discussion forum and students were invited to review same using a graphic organiser which was provided to scaffold the review process. The graphic organisers were then posted to the discussion forum where two critical friends provided feedback.	Extend students' content, language and learning skills
Language Learning Journal (Blogs)	The blog feature within Moodle was used to facilitate the creation of online learning journals.	Demonstrate students' engagement with and meaningful use of new language

Qualitative data was collected from a variety of sources e.g. student feedback/reflections, module questionnaires and focus groups. The themes that emerged from an analysis of the data are



described below and when considered altogether capture students' language learning experiences as a whole.

4. Findings

This paper presents and discusses the findings of one aspect of a study exploring students' perceptions of a blended learning experience i.e. their perceptions of the effectiveness of a blended language learning approach.

4.1 Self-motivation and self-management

Students reported that a technology-enhanced environment which incorporated multiple modes, placed more emphasis on self-regulated language learning. Individualised language learning opportunities (e.g. language glossary) enabled students to self-direct specific learning activities to fill their knowledge gaps. This in turn provided students with a motivational orientation. Students highlighted that learner autonomy was supported through carefully crafted student-centred tasks which promoted and supported language learning and production (e.g. blogs and fora) and learner evaluation of progress, subsequently leading to attributional motivation.

4.2 Sharing of linguistic knowledge leading to improved language learning

Students interacted together and shared their knowledge and skills in order to achieve specific language learning goals. They were exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative meaning-focused and form-focused language by engaging with an authentic audience. Students reported that online activities addressed the complexity of language associated with research and linguistics, including its multiple interrelated subsystems e.g., discourse, grammar, lexis, phonology. Through engaging with new language in this blended learning programme, students became more language aware and language informed paying conscious attention to form-function connections leading to intentional L2 acquisition.

4.3 Authentic student-student interaction and language practice

Authentic digital opportunities for student-student language interaction and collaboration encouraged students to form personal associations with the content under discussion and to invest in the language learning experience. This investment in turn, engaged, challenged and facilitated students in sustained and repeated use of formulaic language. Students also reported that authentic student-student interaction through blogs and discussion fora stretched their linguistic resources to meet their communicative needs.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights benefits of a blended language learning experience as perceived by eight immersion teachers. Online teaching needs to be conducted in a manner that accords with how students learn an L2 in a computer-mediated environment. In other words, for blended learning instruction to 'work', it has to be compatible with how learners learn. Blended learning creates new opportunities for language immersion educators to design and develop innovative learning activities targeted towards active student engagement and language learning. It is fundamental that immersion educators draw on and are familiar not only with SLA theory and research findings but also with available technologies which support and stimulate L2 learning. It is also critical however that immersion educators have the capacity to weave together these different domains of knowledge in a pedagogy-led, technology-enhanced, cohesive manner. An *appropriate* blend has potential to cater effectively for learner differences while achieving programme learning outcomes.

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