



Advancing Scholarship in Immersion Teaching and Learning through Blogging

T.J. Ó Ceallaigh¹

University of Limerick, Ireland¹

Abstract

In immersion education, teachers concurrently address content, language and literacy development through their students' second language. To do so effectively, requires significant teacher preparation and professional development [7]. Scholars have argued that in addition to native or near-native proficiency in instructional language(s), immersion teaching requires a particular knowledge base and pedagogical skill set [6]. Immersion teacher preparation, therefore, is essential for the continued success and growth in language immersion education. Despite our increased awareness of the importance of providing a balanced instructional focus on form and meaning across the immersion curriculum, immersion teachers' understandings of how to design and implement the most effective and efficient blend remains incomplete [8]. This paper reports on how blogs were used in intense and multifaceted ways to cultivate interconnected aspects of immersion teacher knowledge. Collaborative blogging was used to enable twenty-two Irish immersion teachers to understand the critical connection between language and content and to develop the mandatory linguistic competencies and associated pedagogical practices of immersion. Data were collected from a variety of sources e.g. an extensive online questionnaire, reflections, assignments and focus groups. Findings provide unique insights into the knowledge demands related to designing and implementing content lessons and reveal the challenges for Irish immersion teachers in providing balanced language and content instruction. Findings suggest that the collaborative nature of online interaction was central to developing teachers' linguistic resources in the immersion language and extending and transforming immersion teacher knowledge. Blogging enabled immersion teachers to engage in on-going, in-depth, systematic, and reflective examinations of their teaching practices and cultivated learner autonomy, motivation and success. Collaboration, motivation and challenge in turn promoted self-regulated language learning and advanced scholarship in immersion teaching and learning. This paper will conclude with a discussion on implications for designing meaningful and effective professional development experiences for language immersion teachers through collaborative blogging.

Keywords: *immersion, blogging, linguistic competencies, scholarship, form, meaning*

1. Introduction

Immersion education can be perceived as an enrichment bilingual education model that is most commonly associated with students who are learning through their second language (L2). While the strong development of students' receptive skills in listening and reading in the immersion language has been noted, their productive skills in speaking and writing have consistently shown linguistic inaccuracy [4] [9]. Scholars speculate that immersion teachers' lack of attention to language in their content instruction is, in part, related to the shortcomings that have been observed in immersion student language acquisition [12]. There is now an increasing consciousness that in order for the immersion language to be learned effectively, a focus on the language forms of that language must also be integrated into the curriculum [6]. However, neither pre-service nor in-service teachers who teach in immersion programmes have been given adequate support or guidance to focus on linguistic features of the target language while teaching subject matter content at the same time, and there is an increasing call for appropriate, systematic and sustained professional development to achieve this goal [2] [5] [11]. Very little research has been conducted on teacher professional development focused on immersion instruction, and teachers' perceptions, experiences and voices remain scarcely studied in the literature [2] [8].

2. Immersion teacher education in the Republic of Ireland

In the Republic of Ireland, immersion teacher credentials are parallel to those of non-immersion teachers even though research constantly highlights how the specific needs of teachers in Irish-medium immersion (IMI) contexts are not being met by current provision [8] [9]. IMI education is normally provided to students for whom Irish is not their first language (L1) in schools outside the



*Gaeltacht*¹ regions, known as *Gaelscoileanna*. 2018/2019 statistics reveal that a total of 323 Irish-medium schools cater for a student population of 60,052 students [13] i.e. approximately 6.4 % of all school going children. The goal of IMI is academic achievement, bilingualism and biliteracy as well as expansion of the minority language and culture into the community and nationally.

Teaching content matter to immersion students in a language in which they have limited proficiency clearly requires teaching strategies unlike those used in mother tongue instruction. The crux of effective immersion teaching is content and language integration, yet the instructional integration of language and content continues to prove challenging for teachers. They struggle to conceptualise how language can be meaningfully integrated into content teaching and report gaps in their declarative knowledge about and competence in the immersion language [8]. These deficiencies in turn constrain IMI teachers in successfully integrating content and language in instruction. The extent to which immersion pedagogy entails the integration of language and content is seen to affect learning outcomes [7]. Research confirms that Irish-medium immersion teachers who teach content through their students' second language or to a group of linguistically diverse students require considerable professional development to do so effectively.

3. Integrating language and content in higher education through blogging

In an attempt to address the professional needs presented above among others, a new blended learning postgraduate programme, Master of Education in Irish-medium Education (*An M. Oid. san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge*), was officially launched in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland in 2013. An underlying aim of the programme is to demonstrate best practice in content and language integration and in so doing, enable students to transform and enrich their understandings and practices in relation to content and language integration in their immersion contexts. A blended learning design was adopted to provide students with opportunities to experience learning in collaboration with peers and experts locally and globally and to narrow the chasm that sometimes exist between teacher education offerings and IMI teacher realities. In order to seize the potential of digital technologies and social media, for enhancing and innovating the student learning experience, a diverse range of technology enhanced learning tasks were designed and strategically used in intense and multifaceted ways to bring about desirable results. The creative use of collaborative blogs is one example of this pedagogical approach. A blog is a journal-like website made up of dated posts, presented in reverse chronological order, often with threaded comments under each post [10]. Blogs are multifaceted offering unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays and are thus argued to be ideal spaces for the development and expression of expertise [1]. Blogs support reflective learning and the development of a sense of ownership or authority [3]. Blog-enhanced tasks stimulate learning and building community [10] [1].

4. Methodology

This study is a qualitative analysis of immersion teachers' perspectives on how a professional development initiative emphasizing language-focused content instruction impacted their practices. In pairs and using an instructional sequence [6], participants designed, implemented, recorded and evaluated a content-based unit that integrated a focus on an identified language feature immersion learners find challenging. The instructional sequence included four interrelated activities: a noticing activity designed to make language features more salient; an awareness activity that required learners to manipulate and reflect on the language features (analysis or inductive rule discovery); a guided practice activity that pushes students to use the features in a meaningful yet controlled context with feedback in order to develop automaticity and accuracy; an autonomous practice activity that encouraged students to use the features in more open-ended ways to develop fluency, motivation, and confidence. Participants were invited to record and analyse the teaching and learning sequence, critically analyse and reflect on their role in the process and present an improvement plan based on evidence. Participants also shared insights, experiences, critical incidents and engaged in collaborative reflection and feedback at an end of module professional learning event. Twenty-seven Irish-medium immersion teachers with varied language backgrounds, teaching and learning experiences, needs, dispositions and learning styles participated in the study. In order to gain insights into participants' experiences throughout the process, as well as the impact of collaborative blogging on outcomes, the research focused on the following research question: What is the impact of

¹ Gaeltacht is an Irish-language word for any primarily Irish-speaking region



collaborative blogging on participant experiences and outcomes? In this case study, a number of data collection tools were used to capture the breadth and richness of participants' understandings, experiences and learning. Data were collected from an extensive online questionnaire, individual interviews, online discussion fora, and focus groups.

5. Results

Findings suggest that collaborative blogging geared at content and language integration cultivated participant capacity and community.

5.1 Cultivating capacity through collaborative blogging

Participants interacted together and shared their knowledge and skills in order to achieve specific but tailored content and language learning goals. A strong sense of enlightenment and reflection was at the heart of participants' experiences during the blogging initiative. Immersion teachers underwent a significant clarifying process regarding the four interrelated activities of the instructional sequence and in so doing expanded their pedagogical repertoires. They had the opportunity to incorporate new concepts regarding both content and language into their teaching as well as reflect upon their previously held beliefs and teaching methods. These experiences led to transformative learning. Through creatively engaging with new language in blog-enhanced content-driven interactions, participants became more language aware and language informed. They demonstrated explicit knowledge of specific lexicon, grammar and semantics (i.e. declarative knowledge) and reflective, responsive and self-directed language use (i.e. procedural knowledge) during asynchronous online discussions. Collaborative blogging therefore supported immersion teachers to demonstrate understanding of content and language integration but also advance linguistic skills and competences in the language of instruction.

5.2 Cultivating community through collaborative blogging

All blogs were linked to other blogs by their authors, thus creating networked communities of writers and readers, known collectively as the 'blogosphere'. This class 'blogosphere' stimulated: intellectual exchange and shared experience outside the classroom (which focused intensely on content and language instruction); an integrated mindset and an openness to change; the interrogation and critique of their assumptions, understandings and experiences and the ability to see themselves and develop as content *and* language teachers; learning conversations based on immersion knowledge in practice and dilemma management in immersion; collaborative reflection and strategic planning informed from evidence fostering an effective learning culture, cultures of inquiry and a community of practice. Collaborative sharing enabled immersion teachers to engage in systematic monitoring and planning for language-focused content instruction and progress their learning and scholarship.

6. Discussion, implications and conclusion

This initiative placed particular emphasis on the acquisition of subject content knowledge while concurrently building second language proficiency. These findings provide unique insights in relation to the impact of collaborative blogging on participant experiences and outcomes. The complexities and challenges of identifying and integrating specific linguistic outcomes in diverse subject domains in linguistically diverse Irish-medium classrooms were unpacked through collaborative blogging and high-impact teaching and learning strategies which fostered content and language integration were examined. The pivotal role of immersion teacher language awareness in this process was also interrogated. Immersion teachers demonstrated the ability to apply knowledge of form-focused instructional strategies that enhance content and language learning throughout the curriculum. Capacity and community, facilitated through collaborative blogging, were fostered through critical reflection, deep knowledge investigation, development of expertise, learning conversations and collaborative dialogue and support. Blogging enabled participants to track their own learning trajectories and critically reflect on those experiences. Collaborative blogging therefore stimulated professional growth and enabled participants to advance their scholarship in immersion teaching and learning. While there is a growing body of literature on effective immersion teaching, the research base on immersion teacher preparation and professional development is somewhat scant. It is important to continue to contribute to this research base and to build on these experiences to inform and develop a coherent vision or strategy for continuous professional development initiatives for immersion teachers.



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