Reinvigorating Language and Literacy Development through Blogging and Vlogging

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Abstract

While research on language immersion education has heralded benefits such as cognitive skills, academic achievement and language and literacy development, many studies have also identified challenges to its successful implementation, particularly as they relate to students' productive skills. It has been suggested that the less than optimal levels of students' immersion language persist in part because immersion teachers lack systematic approaches for integrating language into their content instruction. Technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) 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 linguistic knowledge [1,2]. This paper reports on how students in six post-primary schools used TELL to further develop and enhance their productive skills in a minority language. Five of the schools were in English speaking communities which provide immersion education in the minority language, Irish (Gaelic). The sixth school was in an Irish speaking community where the language of instruction is Irish and caters for both native speakers and learners alike. The students, who were in their transition year (approximately 15 years of age), created blogs based on a two-week work experience placement in their preferred profession. This information was subsequently used to create innovative vlogs to capture their experience and to inform their peers of their experience. Data were collected from a variety of sources e.g. questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, student blogs and vlogs. Findings suggest that all students improved their language production skills in a very creative and innovative way. In addition, the process of creating blogs and vlogs provided students with a sense of audience and ownership which positively improved their self-efficacy. This process also enabled students to work collaboratively and learn from and with their peers through peer-modelling. This paper will conclude with a discussion on the implications for teacher and classroom practice in a minority language context.

Keywords: *blog, vlog, language development, literacy skills, minority language, immersion education*.

1. Introduction

Irish, or Gaeilge, is an autochthonous (indigenous) language spoken in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland has two official languages: Gaeilge and English. Irish is the first official language of Ireland and an official language of the European Union. However, English is the mother tongue of the majority of the population. Faced with the slow but constant decline of the use and transmission of the national language, the political authorities have engaged in a maintenance and revitalization plan which comprises of different components. Key acts of legislation also impact on the popularity and development of the Irish language. Schools play a critical role in supporting the maintenance, revitalisation and development of the minority language. This paper reports on how students in six post-primary Irish-medium schools used technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) to further develop and enhance their productive skills in Irish. The paper begins by defining Irish-medium education (IME), paying particular attention to students' linguistic outcomes. The benefits of TELL are then reviewed. Finally, the research design used in this study is presented before turning to the presentation of the results and a discussion on the findings.

2. Irish-medium education

Irish-medium education (IME) is a form of bilingual education in which students receive subject matter instruction through the medium of a minority language, which they are learning at school. Some IME schools are located in Irish language speech communities or *Gaeltachtaí*. This IME model strives for the rejuvenation of the indigenous language (i.e. Irish) through the education system. While IME in the *Gaeltacht* was traditionally provided to Irish language mother tongue (L1) students, clear threats to the

sustainability of Irish as a community language in *Gaeltacht* regions have been well documented [3]. Nowadays, IME in the *Gaeltacht* caters for a range of socio-linguistic needs in diverse socio-cultural school contexts. This linguistic diversity and complexity coupled with the increasing use of English in *Gaeltacht* communities presents serious and significant challenges for the *Gaeltacht* education system. IME outside the *Gaeltacht,* or Irish-medium immersion education, is normally provided to students for whom Irish is not their L1. While linguistic capacity is formally developed through the processes of instruction in this IME model, creating opportunities for language use outside of the immersion school environment is a persistent struggle. The pervasive presence of a majority language (English) beyond the school is a challenge that all IME schools face. IME caters for one in every 12 students in the Republic of Ireland with 8.1 per cent of all students at primary level and 3.6 per cent of all students at post-primary level attending IME [4]. Notwithstanding their increased popularity and relative success, these programmes remain complex to implement and are not always as successful as what we would hope them to be [5], [6]. Immersion students' productive language skills are underdeveloped in areas such as grammatical accuracy and complexity, lexical specificity and sociolinguistic appropriateness [6], [7] and there is also evidence that young native speakers are not achieving native speakers norms or full acquisition or enrichment of the language [3]. In fact, some native speakers are achieving higher levels of accuracy and competence in English than in Irish giving rise to subtractive bilingualism [3]. Among all the challenges that IME face, research indicates that the primary issue lies in the difficulty to create well-balanced programmes where both content instruction and language/literacy instruction can be targeted simultaneously [5]. Meeting academic content demands while simultaneously developing proficiency in the minority language poses tremendous challenges for IME teachers. The Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 identifies a range of targets aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning through Irish in IME. The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 also aims to support teachers' professional learning, and as a consequence student outcomes, through the strategic integration of technology in teaching, learning and assessment. An underlying aim of this study was to develop and enhance Irish language and literacy skills and support language acquisition through the use of technology in IME post-primary schools.

3. Technology-enhanced language learning (TELL)

TELL is fast becoming an area of research which traverses all the disciplines in education. TELL not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also promotes autonomous, self-directed learning and learner motivation [8]. It also promotes second language (L2) learning performance and provides learners with a more efficient means for language learning [9], [10]. Moreover, TELL allows teachers to design a more student-centered and flexible approach to language learning which stimulates autonomy, reflection and research skills [11]. Collaborative writing tools, such as blogs and video blogs (vlogs), are used to practise and develop writing and speaking skills in the L2 classroom [12], [13]. Research shows that collaborative writing through a task-based technology-enhanced approach enhances L2 literacy development. Blogs and vlogs enable learners to feel empowered and motivated to communicate [14] and enhance students' engagement and their desire to produce writing of a high quality [15]. As the research suggests, the incorporation of blogs and vlogs in L2 literacy teaching and learning offers promising potential to greatly enhance L2 acquisition and learning.

4. Research Design

This qualitative study examined how TELL (i.e. blogs and vlogs) impacts students' Irish language and literacy development in Irish-medium and *Gaeltacht* post-primary schools. Transition year students (age 15-17 – fourth year in post-primary education) from six IME contexts participated in the study. Students were invited to write blogs and subsequently create vlogs based on their work experience in a setting of their choice. The writing process played a vital role in blog creation and refinement. Teachers scaffolded the language and literacy learning journey be providing overt instruction and tailored feedback. They also choreographed situated practice of terminology and literacy skills. Researchers facilitated four professional development (PD) seminars during the two-year period. Seminars focused on the development of the knowledge base and pedagogical skillset of the participating teachers so as to enable them to support their students to engage with the TELL initiative. Topics explored at seminars included: TELL principles and practices, Irish language and literacy development, the writing process, instructional design of blogs and vlogs, monitoring, evaluation, review and development. A number of data collection tools were used to capture the

breadth and richness of participants' understandings, experiences and development of Irish language and literacy skills through TELL. Data were collected from an extensive online teacher questionnaire, individual interviews with teachers, researcher field notes from PD seminars, focus group interviews with students and student blogs and vlogs. Data analysis unearthed themes in relation to the development of student technology-enhanced Irish language and literacy development in Irish-medium and *Gaeltacht* post-primary schools.

5. Findings
Findings suggest that this TELL initiative fostered students' linguistic capacity in Irish, created authentic opportunities for language use and nurtured a desire in students to use Irish in meaningful, natural and relevant ways.

5.1 Fostering linguistic capacity through TELL
Data from focus group interviews revealed that this TELL initiative triggered students to seek assistance regarding grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure prior to posting. Students also reported that the blogging and vlogging experience afforded them the time and opportunity to reflect on their language use in authentic and meaningful ways. Increased language awareness enabled students to become more proficient users of the language over time. In interviews too, teachers reported that this TELL experience prompted students to think more about their productive skills and gave them an authentic reason to attend to language in meaningful, relevant, realistic ways. This experience in turn ensured reflection, heightened language awareness and personal empowerment. Samples of students work also demonstrated improvement over time in terms of accurate language use. A growing understanding of language as a system, governed by rules and patterns was also evident. This TELL experience stimulated students' meta-linguistic awareness and enabled them to appreciate the systematic character of the Irish language in intense but refreshing ways.

5.2 Creating authentic opportunities for language use through TELL
The collaborative nature of the initiative was central to developing students' linguistic resources in Irish. During focus group interviews, students explained how using Irish in a meaningful way with their peers stimulated by this TELL experience developed their language skills and gave them more confidence in using it in authentic ways. In focus groups, they also reported that they became more language-aware and language-informed users through student-student interaction and peer collaboration and were prompted to self-monitor and self-correct as they engaged with the collaborative blogging and vlogging experience. In interviews, teachers reported that this TELL initiative stimulated students to provide focused and timely linguistic feedback to each other, to engage in appropriate social discourses and to scaffold the language learning journey. They also reported that technology motivated their students in fresh, new and exciting ways to engage with the language learning adventure.

5.3 Nurturing desire for language use through TELL
Data from focus group interviews revealed that students became motivated and self-directed learners and had a positive attitude towards Irish language use. Increased language awareness coupled with an engaging and collaborative TELL experience generated a desire by learners and indeed the learner community to use the Irish language in authentic, innovative and a real-life manner with their peers. In interviews, teachers also reported that students became more motivated through student-student interaction as they engaged in real-life, meaningful discourses through TELL. They also reported that the integration of a multiliteracies approach, i.e. the transformation of a blog to a vlog, provided students with the opportunity to connect with a wider, authentic audience, which in turn motivated them to refine and enrich their co-creations. Students felt empowered by the realisation that they had the power to share their ideas and knowledge with their peers through blogs and vlogs. In interviews, teachers also reported that the sharing of these multimodal texts with peers encouraged students to demonstrate a higher level of thought to their work and to take greater care to edit before publishing.

6. Discussion and conclusion
In this TELL initiative, digital technologies were used in visionary, innovative and meaningful ways to motivate, creatively engage and ensure language and literacy success for all IME learners. Students' linguistic ability was nurtured through the process of instruction. As students became more proficient

users of the Irish language, their engagement with the TELL initiative stimulated them to use their language with their peers in meaningful, natural and relevant ways. This collaborative TELL experience also generated a desire to use Irish in a focused way for communicative purposes. Overt instruction alone does not translate into authentic language use in or outside the IME classroom. As the findings of this study reveal, authentic opportunities for practical, real-life language use are also necessary. It is therefore important for IME teachers to deliberately plan for and cease TELL opportunities which align the participatory culture with real word literacy practices. Such experiences will enable students to construct meaning and participate in meaningful dialogue with peers. In so doing, students may also gain unhindered access to relevant environments to practise and use their growing knowledge of Irish with peers. This experience in turn, generates agency and provides motivational orientation. Minority language functions require constant reinforcement in and outside the school context. As students are constantly engaging in the process of meaning making and sharing multimodal texts in their out-of-school lives, new media, e.g. blogs and vlogs, provide promising potential to sustain, deepen and extend Irish language use and foster the inherent capability of all IME learners of achieving success in Irish language and literacy development.

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