



Asynchronous Language Learning: Student-informed Strengths and Shortcomings

T.J. Ó Ceallaigh¹

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland¹

Abstract

Immersion teachers pedagogical struggle to implement a well-implemented approach, in the context of disciplinary instruction, underscores a need for increased attention to teacher professional development (PD) in the target language [1]. Some scholars claim that technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) promotes second language (L2) learning performance and provides learners with a more efficient means for language learning [2],[3]. Other scholars however, are less convinced of the merits of TELL [4]. There is a dearth of research on virtual PD experiences of immersion teachers which positively impact on their language development. In particular, aspects of online immersion teacher PD remain unexplored and poorly understood. This study focuses on immersion teachers' perspectives, practices and outcomes as they engaged with a 12-week online module delivered through the medium of Irish. Asynchronous delivery strategies were deployed to support content and language learning and online communicative activities (blogs, vlogs, discussion fora, reflections) were designed to stimulate and enrich reception, interaction, production and academic success. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from a variety of sources e.g., end-of-module evaluations, focus groups, students' work and tutor observations. Findings provide unique insights in relation to the effectiveness of an asynchronous learning environment on students' language learning. Specific strengths (e.g. self-assessment and target setting, flexibility, motivation) and shortcomings (e.g. self-regulation, lack of online language use and interaction, social isolation) were identified. In conclusion, lessons learned and tutor reflections of the journey are shared in an attempt to advance learning in the field and to cultivate future innovation in virtual language learning, teaching and assessment.

Keywords: *Technology-enhanced language learning, asynchronous, self-assessment, self-regulation, social isolation*

1. Immersion education

In any bilingual programme, there will be a broad philosophy of bilingualism underpinning it. This philosophy will either be additive or subtractive, being premised either on the value on adding another language to the student's existing repertoire or, conversely, of losing or replacing one language with another [5]. Immersion education is perceived as a strong form of bilingual education [6]. Immersion programmes aim to enable students to attain functional bilingualism and biliteracy in the particular languages concerned by the time they finish post primary school. Research that points to the benefits of immersion is typically based on outcomes associated with well implemented programmes. Researchers have reported that the higher the quality of implementation, the stronger the outcomes for immersion [7], [8]. It has long been established that teachers are the most important school-level factor impacting student achievement. As cognitive demands of academic content grow, so, too, do the linguistic demands. If students do not have strong language proficiency in the immersion language, they will not be able to access or engage with the subject area as they progress from class to class. It is imperative therefore, that immersion programmes employ teachers who are highly proficient in the language(s) of instruction and qualified to teach the subject areas [9].

2. Immersion teacher language awareness

Language awareness, which refers to explicit knowledge about language and a conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use, has been strongly advocated as an essential component in teacher education [10]. It incorporates three overlapping domains of language teacher knowledge and beliefs: knowledge or beliefs about why and how the language should be used (including aspects such as attitudes towards and beliefs about the language, knowledge of their own language use and about their learners' language use); knowledge of the underlying systems of the language (including metalinguistic awareness, knowledge of language varieties, and appreciation of the linguistic demands and features of particular lessons or texts); and



pedagogical knowledge about teaching the language. These three domains enable teachers to be language users, language analysts, and language teachers [11]. In immersion, successful content learning is particularly dependent on language. It can be contended that TLA enables subject teachers to effectively support the students' learning of subject content in the context of language and content integration in immersion. Scholars speculate that challenges linked to immersion students' language development can be partly attributed to a lack of TLA. In Irish-medium immersion, studies illustrate that teachers lack confidence in their own linguistic ability, in particular their grasp of the discipline-specific vocabulary [12], [9]. Significant gaps in immersion teachers' declarative knowledge¹ about and competence in the immersion language have been reported [12], [9].

3. The study

Qualitative in nature, this study seeks to understand and observe how interconnected aspects of TLA manifested as immersion teachers engaged with an asynchronous language learning during a 12-week online module delivered through the medium of Irish. Thirty practising immersion teachers with varied language backgrounds, teaching and learning experiences, needs, dispositions and learning styles participated in this study. The research focused on the following research question: How does asynchronous learning experiences shape immersion teachers' perspectives, practices and outcomes? Data were collected from a variety of sources e.g. end-of-module evaluations, focus groups, students' work and tutor observations. Initially, the "raw" data were organized into natural units of related data which seemed to fit together. These units were labelled under codes. Systematic coding was completed through reading and rereading all data. Through a succession of examinations of the relationship among existing units, some codes became subsets of others and therefore were amalgamated [13]. This regrouping process highlighted the richness of the data, as substantial relationships existed between and among units. Progressive drafts resulted in the firming up of themes and finally the central agreed-upon themes in relation to teachers' experiences and outcomes were refined and labelled. These themes will now be discussed below under student-informed strengths and shortcomings.

4. Student-informed strengths

Students identified self-assessment and target setting, flexibility and motivation as particular strengths of the asynchronous language learning experience. These strengths will now be presented below drawing on various data sources.

4.1 Self-assessment and target setting

In focus group interviews, students reported that the asynchronous approach to language learning not only enhanced linguistic proficiency but also promoted self-assessment and target setting. In evaluations, students claimed that digital technologies enabled them to plan, to monitor and reflect on their own learning, provide evidence of progress, share insights and come up with creative solutions. This was also evidenced from student work and assignments. Teachers highlighted that learner autonomy was supported through carefully crafted asynchronous activities.



Fig. 1. Impact of the asynchronous language learning experience on self-assessment and target setting

¹ Information and knowledge regarding language items and subsystems, such as word definitions and rules.



4.2 Flexibility

In evaluations, students reported that the asynchronous language learning experience afforded them a much more flexible approach to language learning which stimulated autonomy, reflection and research skills. Focus group interviews also identified flexibility as a strength of the whole asynchronous experience.

I was able to engage with my work anytime, anywhere and on any device. This helped me a lot as I have many other commitments which demand time and attention also. I did not waste time traveling and I could collaborate with my class from the comfort of my own home. I felt much more confident working from home.

(Student A, Focus group interview).

4.3 Motivation

Online discussions stimulated students to question assumptions, to interpret, to infer, to induct, to deduct, to argue and to evaluate, thus cultivating a way of thinking and a specific set of skills. Teachers interacted together and shared their knowledge and skills in order to achieve specific but tailored language learning goals. Through creatively engaging with new language in this manner, teachers became more language aware and language informed. In focus group interviews, they reported that this motivating experience also empowered them to share language learning experiences among colleagues in their school contexts and build whole-school capacity as the excerpt from the focus group interview below illustrates. Student motivation was also noted in tutor observations.

Students seem to be online all the time. The majority of the students are very eager and give lots of constructive feedback and support to their colleagues online through the various discussion fora. The conversations are very insightful and completed connected to the content and to their experiences. Some of these conversations seem to go on for ever...

(Tutor observation notes).

5. Student-informed shortcomings

Students also identified particular shortcomings of the asynchronous language learning initiative e.g. self-regulation, lack of online language use and interaction and social isolation. These shortcomings will now be discussed below drawing on the varied data sources.

5.1 Self-regulation

While students reported in focus group interviews that they enjoyed the asynchronous experience, they also claimed that it was extremely challenging to exert self-control to engage with the assigned work each week and as a result become a self-regulated language learners.

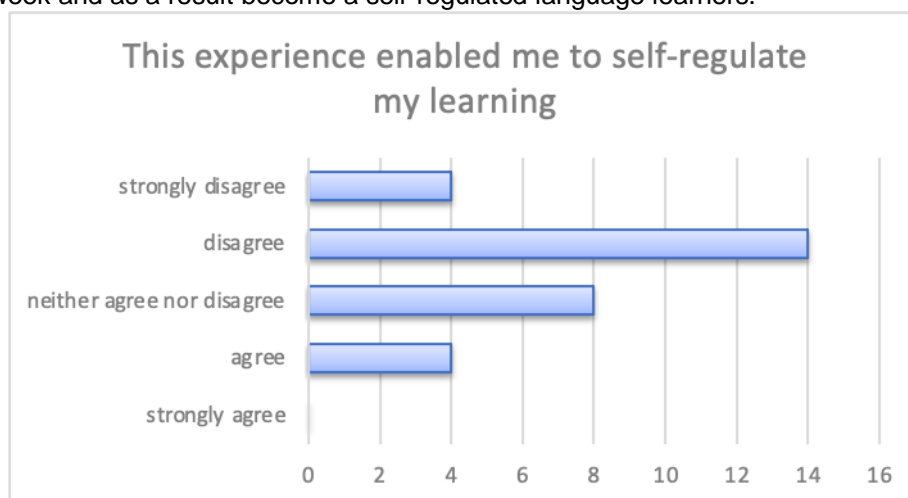


Fig. 2. Impact of the asynchronous language learning experience on self-regulation



5.2 Lack of online language use and interaction

The opportunities for interaction and engagement in the asynchronous language learning environment were varied and included spoken and written interaction. In evaluations, students reported that they struggled to use language in authentic ways due to the asynchronous design. Some students reported that they did not engage as much as they hoped to as they found it difficult to engage due to lack of confidence in their own proficiency. Tutor observations also noted similar concerns.

Some students are really engaged but other students are not. I am concerned that the students who do not engage are missing out on language learning, practice and use and on creating community with their peers. I am also concerned that those who do not engage need it most!

(Tutor observation notes).

5.3 Social isolation

Students also reported that they missed the spontaneity and community of the 'real' classroom environment and as a result felt isolated as the excerpt below illustrates.

You don't feel as connected to your peers with this asynchronous approach. Sometimes, I longed to have a live conversation but nobody was online by the time I got myself together. You can't beat a real conversation with a real person in real time.

(Student D, Focus group interview).

6. Conclusion

TLA is multifaceted and understanding any element of it is a complex task. In this study, digital technologies were used in visionary, innovative and meaningful ways to motivate, creatively engage and ensure success for all language learners. Teachers' TLA was addressed in a structured, tailored approach through asynchronous language learning experiences which cultivated communities of practice. Teachers' professional learning was enhanced and the use of technology for language teaching, learning and assessment was embedded in teachers' practices as a direct result of their engagement with this initiative. These findings illustrate several points of access into classroom research and pedagogy and uncover core aspects of high impact asynchronous language learning experiences. This study contributes to a greater understanding of TLA in immersion and provides compelling evidence of the consciousness-raising and critical language awareness potential of asynchronous learning environments as a pedagogical framework in immersion teacher education.

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