



In the Virtual Medieval Marketplace: Learning Dead Languages and Cultures Through Content and Language Integrated Learning

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Abstract

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) promotes teaching grammar in the cultural context of its use. While video games offer an ideal medium for such lessons, the potential of CLIL in teaching dead languages is largely untapped. This paper examines a module of Brendan's Voyage, an online game under development for teaching medieval French through twelfth-century narratives. Supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Brendan's Voyage represents a fresh approach for educators teaching extinct languages with modern methodologies.

We focus on module 3, which introduces players to key present tense verbs in medieval French. Instead of direct grammar instruction, the module uses games set in a twelfth-century marketplace connected to Henry I's French-speaking court. Players immerse in the era's multilingualism, encountering languages like Catalan, Dutch, and medieval French. As they learn essential verb forms, they also engage with a historically authentic backdrop, highlighting the era's linguistic diversity and narrative traditions.

Brendan's Voyage captures CLIL's essence by immersing learners in a cultural setting while teaching a dead language. Given that time travel is unfeasible, the game provides a virtual immersive historical experience, allowing players to interact with diverse characters and hear the language in historically recreated contexts. This method is expected to boost learner motivation. Brendan's Voyage is a novel CLIL application, enriching the learning journey for dead languages through immersive experiences.

Keywords: *immersion, CLIL, multi-lingualism, game-based learning*

1. Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has stressed the importance of teaching grammar through the study of the cultures in which a language is spoken and written [1]. CLIL approaches combine subject-area learning with target language acquisition, engaging learners and requiring them to situate their language skills within a complex and challenging matrix, often immersed in the target culture. Video games and other digital immersive environments are well suited to achieve this goal [2] [3] [4], but unfortunately CLIL-compliant games are rare, even for modern languages. For instance, *Slime Forest Adventure* teaches elements of the Japanese language, but the game mechanics (killing slime and rescuing a princess) provide an engaging and gamified experience that does not allow students to understand Japanese culture better or combine language learning with subject-area learning [5]. Playing commercial off-the-shelf games (such as *Call of Duty*) in the target language has allowed modern language learners to immerse themselves in a language experience. These games arguably offer contextualized language learning, but to have a truly effective CLIL experience, learning within and about the target language culture is essential. The ability to change the target language of the game necessarily flattens the target culture to one that approaches the culture of game production. *Learn Japanese RPG: Hiragana Forbidden Speech* is an example of a modern language-learning game that recognizes and addresses this problem by leveraging the worlds of Japanese anime [6].

Even a flattened cultural experience is not available for many languages, and the potential of CLIL to teach dead languages is still vastly underexplored. To that end, we explore one learning module of *Brendan's Voyage*, an online video game designed to teach medieval French language through a series of learning activities that immerse the player within culturally significant tales from the twelfth century in which the target language evolved. In development with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Brendan's Voyage* offers a scalable model for other teachers of dead



languages and past cultures who look to revolutionize their pedagogies and increase learner motivation [7] through modern language learning, acquisition, and teaching paradigms.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Brendan's Voyage Overview

Brendan's Voyage is composed of five successive modules that initially position the player in the French-speaking court of Lady Adeliza of Louvain, the twelfth-century figure who commissioned the translation of the Brendan tale from Latin into Anglo-Norman French. In module one, the player meets the queen in her palace and learns basic greetings and vocabulary in Anglo-Norman. These basic language learning goals are accomplished through cultural immersion activities, from learning about female patronage of medieval poetry to discovering the importance of Saint Brendan for twelfth-century English culture. Having received a commission from the queen to translate the Brendan story into Anglo-Norman, the player proceeds to a monastic scriptorium in module two. Here, a monk helps the player acquire a more expansive Anglo-Norman vocabulary while the player learns elements of medieval manuscript production. As with module one, this portion of the game realizes CLIL's goal of offering language instruction through immersion in the target language's culture. Module three, discussed below, conveys the player to a medieval market.

Modules four and five take place in ancient Ireland where the player is magically transported within the story of St. Brendan. These final modules advance the player's learning of Anglo-Norman while incorporating exposure to Late Antique Irish monasticism and maritime voyages as imagined by later medieval audiences. Thus, the game unfolds in two phases: the first modules conduct the player through the world of the Brendan story's material production in the Middle Ages; by contrast, the final modules allow a glimpse, however fanciful, of the much older Irish world that constitutes the narrative of the Brendan poem. These two phases of the video game present two distinctive medieval cultures that shape the learning environments of the game's language learning activities.

2.2 Multilingual Immersion in the Twelfth Century

One of the main cultural priorities animating the game design is to expose players to the rich multilingualism of twelfth-century English life. This goal becomes explicit in module three, which invites players to explore a medieval market within the walls of Lady Adeliza's palace. Having been tasked with translating (and transcribing) the Brendan tale from Latin into Anglo-Norman, the player must now acquire the necessary items for the task such as ink ingredients. Working with our video game design counterparts at Causeway Studios, we prioritized an environment that would reflect the multilingual setting of medieval English markets. As in the contemporary world, medieval markets formed a nexus of global trade where sailors, merchants, and artisans would conduct their business in a range of languages. To take just one example, lapis lazuli appearing in medieval manuscripts was famously sourced from Afghanistan [8]. This fact is explicitly incorporated into the gameplay. At one point during the module, the player purchases ingredients from different stalls requiring the player to read a letter from a merchant indicating his purchases of Tunisian spices and Afghani lapis lazuli.

As this example illustrates, the many commercial goods of medieval markets signified the diverse destinations and sources of these objects and their vendors, necessitating a corresponding diversity of global languages. Such multilingualism also characterized medieval literary translation and production, which is prominent in the story of St. Brendan. In addition to the Anglo-Norman translation, the original Latin poem was translated into a host of other languages including Catalan and Old Dutch [9]. We wanted the experience to reflect the multilingual history of the source text while simultaneously illustrating the linguistic diversity of the medieval market. As a result, players encounter greetings in Anglo-Norman, Catalan, and medieval Dutch while moving about the market stalls. While no activity within the module asks the player to comprehend the vocabulary of these other languages, the user is still valuably immersed in authentic linguistic exposure to diverse languages that typified medieval commerce and textual transmission alike.

This environment of immersive multilingual and multicultural exposure frames the module's explicit task of learning simple present tense conjugations for key Anglo-Norman verbs (such as "to buy") as well as relevant vocabulary. The commercial vocabulary is itself derived from the Anglo-Norman Brendan text, featuring nouns like candle, wax, and wood. The game script also incorporates precious stones like amethyst which are prominently featured in the story of St. Brendan [10]. This approach ensures that the modular vocabulary is not arbitrary but instead reflects key terms that are culturally significant to the narrative culture informing the game design. Players of the video game—be



they scholars or students—are prepared to use their new language knowledge as a tool to interact with a particular story and an authentic manuscript tradition.

For example, in module three the player converses with a merchant, explaining the need to purchase supplies for manuscript transcription. The merchant replies that he has all the supplies needed for such a long task, including candles and oil. Then the merchant offers food for the task ahead: “I will bring you enough provisions and I will find you a great abundance of meat for the long days ahead!” The expressions “I will bring you enough provisions” and “I will find you a great abundance of meat” are both lifted directly from passages in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot*. When the player hears the expression *De viande je vus troverai plentét grande* (I will find you a great abundance of meat), the player receives comprehensible linguistic input directly sourced from an authentic text in the medieval target culture.

2.3 Multilingualism Matters

This multilingual approach works against any stereotype of the Middle Ages as a time of linguistic purity. It is well established that many nationalist groups in Europe and the United States have perennially fashioned false narratives of cultural and linguistic purity attached to medieval cultures [11]. This construal of the Middle Ages cannot withstand historical scrutiny given the extreme diversity of complex languages and cultures that saturated medieval environments (such as England in the twelfth century). Despite the historical evidence contradicting these nationalist appropriations of medieval pasts, the stereotypes persist. Using CLIL as a guiding pedagogical framework, *Brendan’s Voyage* emphasizes medieval multilingualism to reclaim a historically informed account of cultural diversity within medieval cultures. CLIL has been known to increase “positivity towards plurilingualism and pluriculturalism” since the 1990’s [12]. Our video game builds on these past successes in the contemporary language classroom. Foregrounding multilingualism in *Brendan’s Voyage* extends CLIL’s demonstrated uses to help combat nefarious stereotypes through dead language instruction.

3. Conclusion

The Middle Ages, often misconstrued as a monolingual era, was, in fact, linguistically diverse. *Brendan’s Voyage*, drawing inspiration from the CLIL framework, offers an accurate portrayal, challenging prevailing myths. By spotlighting medieval multilingualism and the intricate ties between language and culture, the game stands as a testament to the value of plurilingualism in education and asserts the importance of integrating language learning with its cultural and historical context.

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