

Chapter 52

Gaeilge Gaming: Assessing How Games Can Help Children to Learn Irish

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ABSTRACT

In the 2011 census almost one in three Irish teenagers claimed to be unable to speak Irish (Central Statistics Office, Ireland, 2012), despite the language being taught daily in school. The challenges facing the Irish language in schools are complex and multifaceted. The research reported here attempts to address some of these challenges by adopting a novel approach to teaching Irish to primary school children using an online detective game. This paper details how a group of 10 year old children ($n = 17$) report their experience of the game, and how this compares to its proposed affordances for language learning. Overall, the children responded very positively, and identified significant motivational factors associated with the game, such as rewards, positive team interactions, challenge and active learning. Their feedback demonstrates that this use of gaming technology has the potential to support children's language learning through creating a language community where users are motivated to use Irish in a meaningful way.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports how an online immersive detective game was developed with the goal of maximising children's engagement with and use of the Irish language. The children's experience of the game will be presented and contrasted with the projected affordances of the learning intervention. A brief background will first be given to describe the current situation with Irish in schools in Ireland. Then recent research on gaming and virtual worlds for language learning will be reviewed, before describing the development of the game, its implementation in the classroom. The findings demonstrate how effective this approach can be for language learning, particularly in the Irish context.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7663-1.ch052

The Irish Language Context

Irish is the official first language of the Irish state, however at present it is only spoken as a community language by 3% of the population (Central Statistics Office, Ireland, 2012). It is a compulsory subject in Irish schools, with daily language classes for the vast majority of children between the ages of 5-18. Despite this significant investment of time and resources, almost one in three teenagers claimed to be unable to speak the language in the 2011 census, and research in the primary school has shown a sharp decline in standards of attainment since the 1980s (Harris, Forde, Archer, Nic Fhearaile, & O’Gorman, 2006).

For most primary-age children, their only contact with the Irish language is in the daily Irish lesson, a few classroom phrases in school and perhaps incidental Irish use outside of the school context, for example in place names and road signage. While Irish children and adults tend to be positively disposed towards the language (McCoy, Smyth, & Fitzpatrick, 2012; MORI Ireland, 2005), motivation can be an issue for children who limited opportunity to use Irish outside of school in an authentic language community (Ó Laoire, 2005). A recent study by Devitt *et al* highlighted the problem of primary school children’s excess disengagement with Irish when compared with school in general and with Maths and English, and suggested a link between this disengagement and a lack of exposure to Irish outside of school (Devitt, Condon, Dalton, et al., 2016).

Technology may hold the key to connecting Irish speakers together to form a virtual language community and to create an environment where Irish is used to communicate in meaningful and authentic ways.

Three-Dimensional Virtual Environments for Language Learning

Turning to technology, immersive 3D virtual spaces show great promise for creating a virtual language community, facilitating situated learning and immersion in a target language. Furthermore, the motivational impact of games can be leveraged to keep learners interested and motivated to engage with the language in the game context (Reinders, 2012). Traditionally, research in digital game-based language learning (DGBLL) and in virtual worlds language learning (VWLL) has run in parallel, with little overlap. However, they do intersect in the immersive 3D environments that can be found in both fields: three-dimensional, virtual environments (3D VEs) that are configured for multiple users. Furthermore, using a Task-based language teaching (Nunan, 2004) approach in a virtual world gives goal orientation, making a 3DVE experience more game-like. In order to recognise the fluidity and commonality of identity in virtual worlds and games, 3D VE can be used as an umbrella term to encompass similar environments originating in different fields. Dalton and Devitt used this term in a new classification of immersive environments (Dalton & Devitt, 2016). Cornillie *et al* had excluded VWLL from DGBLL research because of a lack of goal orientation (Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012), but Dalton and Devitt’s taxonomy provides an inclusive taxonomy with a continuum of goal orientation, thus allowing a consideration of affordances of both VWs and games.

The affordances for language learning in a virtual world include the sense of presence afforded by the avatar, and the corresponding immersion that may take place, the opportunities for interaction, often through multiple modes, facility for collaboration (Peterson, 2011). These can also be present in an immersive game, which brings additional affordances of fun, having goals, being interactive and receiving feedback (Cornillie et al., 2012).

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