



A needs survey of overseas Irish language learners

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Abstract. The vast majority of endangered languages are expected to have vanished from community use within one to two generations (Lackaff & Moner, 2016). One such language, Irish, may die out as a vernacular within a decade in the Irish-speaking regions of Ireland (Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015). However, there is growing interest in the Irish language overseas, particularly in the USA (Schwartz, 2020). In this study, a survey was conducted with 92 respondents to identify the needs of learners living outside of Ireland. The findings of this needs assessment suggest that overseas Irish learners would benefit from the provision of an online Irish language community that connects members through communicative and collaborative language activities. Positioned in the context of similar developments and innovations internationally (e.g. Henry, Carroll, Cunliffe, & Kop, 2018), this research builds on existing literature in online sociocultural language learning.

Keywords: social learning, Irish language, design-based research, online language communities.

1. Introduction

The Irish language has been described as ‘definitely endangered’ (Moseley, 2010) and as being in a state of severe decline (Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015). This trend contrasts with a significant interest in learning Irish beyond Ireland, particularly in the USA (Hickey & Stenson, 2016). These overseas learners, however, tend to have limited opportunities for sociocultural language learning and practice. Design-Based Research (DBR) is a methodological approach that aims to provide practical solutions to real world problems (McKenney & Reeves, 2014). In advance of implementing a DBR intervention, Reeves (2006) proposes close consultation with relevant researchers and practitioners. The use of a needs

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survey allows for educators to discern learners' requirements, attitudes, and preferences (Basturkmen, 1998; Elisha-Primo et al., 2010). In this needs survey, the data collected will be used to inform a DBR intervention to support overseas Irish learners.

2. Method

The principal objective of this survey was to identify the needs of overseas Irish language learners, and to gather their feedback on a potential online language community. This objective led to the following research questions for the needs survey.

- What is the profile and background of these learners?
- What is the current status of their Irish language studies?
- What are their thoughts on a future online Irish language platform?

Participants in this survey identified as Irish language learners who were located outside of Ireland. A total of 92 learners responded to the online needs survey questionnaire via an online questionnaire using Google Forms. The survey was distributed widely using a number of social media platforms, namely Facebook and Twitter. All students voluntarily participated with informed consent. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected regarding learners' current status of study, personal preferences when studying Irish, and their views on a potential online community. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding learners' profiles. The second section gathered quantitative data on learners' language level, length of time studying Irish so far, how often they attend classes, use of Irish outside of classes, preferred devices for learning, and how they learn best. The third section asked learners about their interest in the development of a collaborative online resource, including three open-ended, qualitative questions regarding the problems they faced when learning Irish, and what suggestions they might have for an online platform that supports their language learning.

Quantitative data were de-identified and exported from Google Forms into SPSS 26 software for descriptive analysis. Participant characteristics including age, gender, location, duration of study, and language level were summarised in frequency tables. Qualitative data were imported into NVivo software and

systematically coded using a thematic approach, as demonstrated by Braun and Clarke (2012).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. What is the profile and background of these learners?

The responses to this question helped inform the design of the intervention by providing information on the potential participants of an online community. A vast 87% of respondents to the needs survey reported being at beginner/A1 level Irish. Two-thirds (65%) were located in the USA. The remaining 35% consisted mainly of those located in Australia, Canada, and parts of Europe. Over half (60%) identified as female and 40% as male. The median age range was 31-36.

3.2. What is the current status of their Irish language studies?

Language usage among respondents was varied, with 33% stating that they use their Irish occasionally, followed by 26% who speak Irish every day, and 30% who claimed to use their Irish most days. Respondents reported being strongest at Irish reading, but requiring more help with speaking, followed by writing and listening. Respondents were asked to describe what they perceived to be their barriers to Irish language learning. Responses were coded line-by-line in NVivo, and six themes emerged. The foremost challenge for 54% of learners was a lack of opportunity to speak, practise, and connect with other learners, as detailed in Table 1. Additional challenges included a need for pronunciation guides (13%), shortage of time (11%), a lack of access to language experts (9%), the absence of a central online resource or portal for Irish language learners (9%), and a lack of motivation (4%). Learners also indicated that they enjoyed using apps for learning and practice, that they were not committed to book learning alone, and that they would like to collaborate with fellow learners.

Table 1. Challenges reported by overseas Irish language learners

Theme	Codes	% of respondents
Lack of opportunity to practise with other learners	speakers, chance to chat, other people, other learners, no speakers, no opportunities, lack of practice, isolated, lack of contact, no one, other speakers, conversation, places, face-to-face, connecting	54

Pronunciation guide	hear, sounds, pronunciation, speak, listen	13
Time	time, opportunity, routine, regularly, lack of structure in own learning	11
Resources/ central portal	no resources, need for a portal, something centralised	9
Lack of experts/ expertise	teachers, native, experts, helpers, lack of structure, questions, grammar	9
Motivation, usefulness, loss of confidence	lack of motivation, getting motivated, usefulness, feeling out of practice	4

3.3. What are their thoughts on a future online Irish language community?

Almost all (92%) of respondents indicated a willingness to collaborate with fellow learners and to contribute to an online Irish language community. Of all learners surveyed, 73% stated that they very rarely, or never, meet up with an Irish speaker outside of class for language practice, and 66% of respondents reported not knowing a person with whom they could practice conversing. Respondents stated that they felt somewhat isolated in their studies. They also cited a lack of routine and time in which to study Irish. Survey participants were asked an open-ended question on how their Irish development could be better supported beyond a classroom environment. Primary codes were assigned to these responses, and 15 themes emerged from the data. The most common suggestions from learners was an increased opportunity for interaction with fellow learners (23%), access to educational resources, such as notes, videos and easy-to-follow podcasts (16%), feedback from teachers and helpers (11%), and the provision of online language activities (10%).

4. Conclusions

The findings of the needs survey suggest potential benefits in designing an online Irish language community. The absence of a central resource for overseas learners can be addressed by providing a social platform where learners are able to connect and interact with each other. Responses from overseas learners indicate that a lack of opportunity to communicate in Irish, and especially through speaking, can be mitigated through the provision of asynchronous language activities and live conversation sessions. Respondents' willingness to contribute to an online community suggests that the platform may also foster a collaborative learning environment conducive to sociocultural learning for overseas learners.

The proposed design compliments the research of Lackaff and Moner (2016), who state that “audiences exist for minority language social platforms, and those who tackle the challenge of designing for these audiences will benefit from a framework that leads to a better understanding of the minority language user in the design research process” (p. 8). The findings of this needs survey, alongside a comprehensive literature review, will be used to inform a DBR intervention allowing overseas Irish learners to ‘connect, communicate, and collaborate’ in an online community, located at the domain Gaeltacht.net. This process will result in a prototype design model, the 3Cs Model for Online Language Communities, and a series of theoretical contributions, which can be utilised by educators to support similar endangered language groups.

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