Assessing learners' needs for practising spoken Icelandic L2 with the mobile app TALAÐU!

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Abstract. This article presents results from a human-centred approach study to designing a mobile app TALAÐU!, which aims at assisting learners of Icelandic as a second language (L2) with spoken language practice. The main goal of the app would be to encourage learners to have real-life conversations with Icelandic speakers by accomplishing conversational missions. In the first stage of development, a qualitative deep-method needs study in the form of interviews was conducted with 19 migrants from 14 different countries, who permanently live in Iceland. Results indicated that learners have five core needs for practising spoken language: connection, confidence, clarity, growth, and convenience. Based on different learning styles and confidence in speaking rather than language ability, three main learner profiles were indicated: 'diving in', 'learning with caution' and 'dipping a toe'. Both the learners' needs and the profiles would drive the design of the learning app to personalise and maximise the learner experience with practising spoken L2. This human-centred study approach suggests an innovative strategy in designing a learning app for practising L2 in a specific language and culture environment.

Keywords: human-centred design, L2 Icelandic, learner profiles, online app, spoken language.

1.   Introduction

In Iceland, many migrants experience a lack of opportunities in practising the spoken language outside of their formal instruction for various reasons, often connected to working with other migrants who do not speak the target language,

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and the segregation of the labour market (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017, p. 25). The tendency of native Icelandic speakers to switch into English when encountering foreign speakers also minimises the exposure to spoken Icelandic and therefore L2 language practice with locals (Kristinsson, 2020). This may influence L2 Icelandic practice of both short-term visitors such as exchange students, seasonal workers, and long-term immigrants from various fields such as education and industry. Several other attempts have been made to increase learners' exposure to spoken Icelandic. This includes courses provided by private language schools or at universities, the project *The Icelandic Village*[3] that involves locals in different businesses speaking Icelandic to foreigners, and also new online technologies such as the prototype of an L2 learning computer game *Virtual Reykjavik* (Bédi et al., 2016) that should enable a simulation of a real-life conversation with locals in a virtual environment. Although there are many other apps on the market that support enhancing language skills, e.g. *Babbel, Busuu*, *Duolingo*, *Lingoda*, *Mondly*, *uTalk*, none of them offer Icelandic language neither are they tailor-made for the needs of L2 Icelandic learners in Iceland. This article presents another attempt to help foreign speakers to practise spoken L2 Icelandic through an online app, which is designed to be used locally in a real-life environment.

TALAÐU!, which translates to English as 'SPEAK!', is a work-in-progress mobile application aiming to assist with spoken language practice in L2 Icelandic. The main goal is to encourage learners to have real-life conversations with Icelandic speakers by accomplishing conversational missions. The aim of this article is to present results from a human-centred study about learners' needs for practising L2 Icelandic. The results would drive the design of the app so that the learner would be able to personalise their journey by choosing a level, setting a daily time for practising, and selecting topics they want to grow their confidence in while using the app. Each day, the app would push notifications to learners with new vocabulary, common phrases, and cultural cues relevant to the topics they had pre-selected. The learners would be moreover encouraged to practise the language in their real-life environment by interacting with locals face-to-face using this app. The communicative approach, task-based learning, and role-play are the main learning approaches used in the app. Gamification elements would consist of rewards that learners will receive for completing individual tasks. The design strategy for teaching spoken language skills in a real-life environment with TALAÐU! considers both the needs and the different learning profiles of non-native speakers of Icelandic for practising spoken language with other native speakers in a real-life environment. Its methodology is presented here below.

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3. https://languagelearninginthewild.com/project/the-icelandic-village/

2.   Understanding the needs of learners

The development of this app follows a human-centred methodology (Buchanan, 2001) whereby potential users take part in the research and design of the solution. When designing information systems, a human-centred approach considers aspects of context and socio-cultural significance to make the system 'human-centred' rather than only 'user-centred' (Gasson, 2003, p. 42). This means that gathering knowledge about problems and offering solutions for the real word are the main goal of this approach. Guided by human feedback, systems can then better serve the needs of their potential users (Schnepp et al., 2020, p. 2). Here, the first stage involved a qualitative deep-method human-centred needs study conducted with 19 participants located within and outside of the capital region from 14 different countries, who came to Iceland for different purposes and under different conditions.

In-depth interviews about informants' ways of learning and needs for practising spoken L2 Icelandic were conducted. Four of the participants did not speak any English but had a considerable level of Icelandic to be interviewed in Icelandic language. Selective sampling method was used to collect data.

Thematic analysis was used for analysis, which indicated five core needs that will drive the design of the app: connection, confidence, clarity, growth, and convenience (Figure 1). These are based on five reoccurring themes from informants' interviews. The purpose is to find a meaningful connection in a conversation, to break the first barrier in speaking the target language, and to move beyond a superficial interaction with speakers of Icelandic.

Figure 1.   Five core needs for achieving a successful conversation with local speakers of Icelandic

The informants' different learning styles and their level of confidence in speaking rather than language ability helped to indicate three main learner profiles for personalising and maximising the learner experience when using the app (Figure 2).

Figure 2.   The app design features three main user profiles
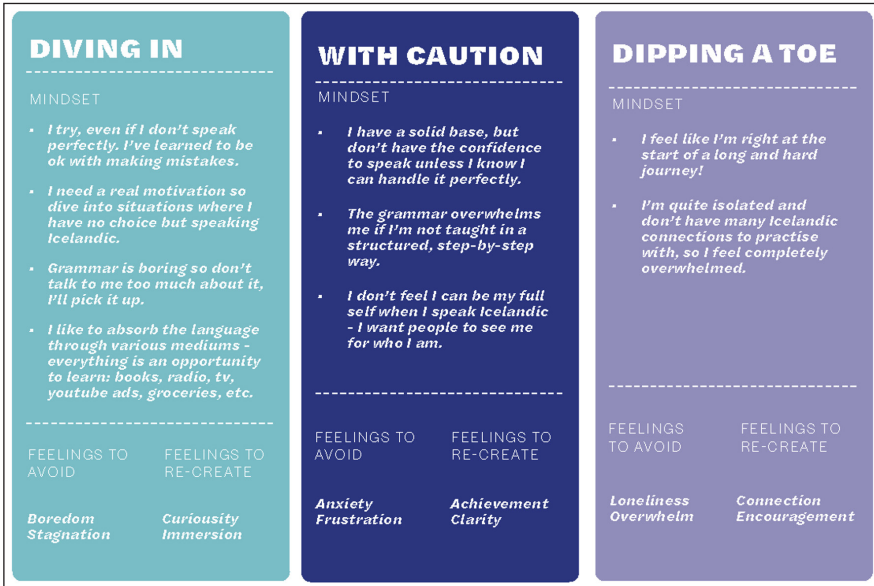
3.   Key design features and user journey

Based on our study, key features are personalisation, selecting useful conversational topics with respective learning materials, choosing from a menu of suggested missions for a conversation practice in real life, and gamification to mark progress to unlock the next level. These features will help the learners immerse themselves into the language through real-world missions, provide feedback, and motivate them to complete individual tasks. The app will be personalised based on the learner profiles and needs for conversation practice.

The learners would set their own time and goals for each mission and receive tips on the type of conversations, vocabulary, and memory exercises around each of the selected topics for conversation in a real-life environment. The missions will help learners put into practice what they have learned on simple or more complicated topics, for example, ordering a coffee or asking older family members about their childhood, by simply speaking to local people. The next level can be unlocked only by completing each mission. The app will support real person-to-person conversation among other things by suggesting phrases and sentences that learners can read and listen to, repeat, and then use in real life. This will help foreign speakers to connect with the local speaking community.

4.   Conclusion

The design approach taken in this human-centred needs study sheds light on the necessity to investigate what kind of needs L2 learners have in the local environment of a specific target language to help them make real-time conversations. The learners would select conversational topics, get help with starting and finishing a conversation, and review vocabulary that they need to use. Although still a work-in-progress, once ready the app would use conversational tasks encouraging learners to complete them in real-life environments. This approach could be applied to design other L2 learning apps because it would shed light on the needs of learners in different language and culture contexts of other countries. The development of this application has three main stages: research about learners' needs, design of the app and the implementation of learning tasks, and the production of a prototype. This article presented findings from the first stage.

5.   Acknowledgements

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