Can WordBricks Make Learning Irish More Engaging for Students?

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ABSTRACT

Learning a language is challenging and it is important that learners be kept motivated throughout the process. Many Irish primary school children are not particularly motivated to learn the language and there are few computer assisted language learning (CALL) resources available to them. WordBricks is an app that enables learners to construct only grammatically correct sentences. It leverages a visual learning paradigm and has a Scratch-like interface. It was originally developed for English, and more recently has been expanded to cater for Irish. This article investigates if using Irish WordBricks is both suitable and usable for primary school learners, if it is pedagogically appropriate for them and if it is enjoyable for them. The WordBricks app was tested by five classes of two different age groups in a typical school in Ireland. This article reports on the results of the WordBricks deployment and the feedback of students and teachers.

KEYWORDS

Computer Assisted Language Learning, Game-Based Learning, Gamification, Irish, Language Learning App, Minority Languages, Mobile Assisted Language Learning, WordBricks, Young Learners
1. INTRODUCTION

Irish is a core subject in both primary and secondary schools in Ireland. There are very few technology resources available for the language as there are limited commercial incentives for companies to develop such resources. Furthermore, it is not a particularly popular subject with students due to motivational and pedagogical issues and there are very few interactive resources for teachers and learners. The aim of this research was to see if a WordBricks app app (Purgina, Mozgovoy, Ward, 2017), which helps students construct grammatically correct sentences in Irish, could make learning more interesting and engaging for them. There were three research questions to answer: a) Would a WordBricks app developed for English and adapted for Irish be suitable and usable by the target user community? b) Would the app be pedagogically appropriate? and c) Would the teachers and students enjoy using the app? The target user group was primary school children learning Irish. The Irish WordBricks app was built using the original WordBricks app infrastructure and adapted to include Irish grammatical construction and vocabulary. The app was tested by 5 different classes in a primary school in Ireland, and this paper reports on the findings of that research.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Language Learning

Learning a language can be an interesting experience for some and challenging for others. There are many factors involved in how successful someone is at learning a language. One interesting factor is how useful or relevant a language is in the perception of the learner. Many students throughout the world learning English as a Foreign Language as it is the (current) global language. While they may not enjoy the experience, they can at least understand why they have to learn it and their parents probably value the opportunity their children have to learn the language. However, the issue of learning a language for non-utilitarian reasons complicates the language learning process. If the parents do not see the value in learning the language, their lack of support or indeed, negative attitudes towards the language can militate against their children’s language learning journey. Motivation is a key facet of successful language learning. This can be either intrinsic or extrinsic or a mixture of both. In recent years, scholars have continued to research language learning motivation and pointed out that this intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy is too simplistic and that the topic of motivation in language learning is more complex (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Ushioda, 2013). Devitt et al., (2018) provide an interesting overview of primary pupils’ attitudes to Irish.

2.2. Irish Language

Irish is one of the two national languages of the Republic of Ireland. It is on the Goidelic branch of the Celtic language family and has a long, written history and oral tradition. It was the L1 (first language) of the vast majority of the population of Ireland, but the number of speakers has continued to decline from the middle of the 19th century.
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