



CAN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING PROMOTE THE USE OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSIVE IRISH LANGUAGE TEACHING?

This article discusses Irish as a school subject across all post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It discusses the significant increase in the number of exemptions from studying Irish, since the application of new criteria. It provides an insight into task-based language learning (TBLL) and discusses some of the opportunities that TBLL can provide to implement universal design for learning (UDL) goals. UDL is an inclusive approach that seeks to accommodate all students together in mainstream education. There are recommendations in the conclusion on how Department of Education policies could be implemented more effectively.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Differentiation, Exemptions, Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

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INTRODUCTION

Irish is a compulsory subject at both primary and post-primary level in Ireland (Department of Education and Science, 2024). This article discusses Irish in a context where over a quarter of pupils in Irish post-primary schools have identified special educational needs (SEN) (McCoy et al., 2019). Due to this, it is worth exploring options to teach the language using methods that cater to different learners' needs. In relation to the study of Irish in post-primary schools, task-based learning is mentioned as one of the "significant elements of teaching and learning in this specification" (The Department of Education, 2023, p.15) in the Junior Cycle. The literature describes how Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) can be used to reduce second students' language anxiety. (Aubrey et al., 2022)

CONTEXT

There are 416,631 students enrolled in 721 post-primary schools in Ireland with 68 of them in the Irish-medium education (T1) sector (Gaeloideachas, 2024). T1 schools are those that operate through the medium of Irish. A total of 3,832 students at post-primary level attend 29 schools in the Gaeltacht (areas where Irish is the community language) and a further 11,951 students attend 47 post-primary schools located outside the Gaeltacht (Gaeloideachas, 2024). The Department of Education (2022) clearly explains in a circular that there is no exemption from studying Irish available in the T1 schools in any case. Nic Aindriú and Ó Duibhir (2023) point out that teachers are facing particular challenges in terms of inclusive education in the T1 sector, as there is a lack of professional development and resources provided to teachers. Outside the T1 sector, there are 404,680 students attending English-medium post-primary schools (T2).

Irish language and exemptions

All students, except those who meet the criteria for a language-learning exemption, are required to study Irish at school. A new system for the granting of exemptions was put in place at the beginning of the academic year in 2019 (Department of Education and Science, 2019). Students who have spent three years in the education system outside Ireland and some learners with an SEN are eligible for an exemption (Citizens' Information, 2024). A research report on the study of Irish (Flynn, et al., 2019) suggested that the exemption process should be re-imagined to be applied in a more inclusive manner. However, the number of exemptions has substantially increased over a number of years with the change in criteria in 2019, and it has continued to increase with the introduction of an update of the criteria in 2022 (Department of Education, 2022; Ó Duibhir, 2023).

McTaggart (2024) indicates that there were 49,570 at post-primary level who were not studying the language. This means that 12.2 % of the population attending T2 schools at post-primary level have exemptions from Irish. It is accepted that the amount of exemptions provided in a number of schools in the T2 sector are out of step, leading the Department of Education to carry out an audit about this matter (McTaggart, 2024).

Inclusive education and Universal Design for Learning

Ireland's latest inclusion guidelines are contained in the Framework for Inclusive Education. The document is based on five key principles (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2011). The Framework was greatly influenced by a ground-breaking literature review by Winter and O'Raw (2010). In this literature review, five principles that should be included in an inclusive education framework were proposed:

1. This approach applies to the whole school community.
2. The approach is reflective of the diversity among different students and schools.
3. There is a need for active engagement in all schools to achieve inclusive education
4. Inclusive education should be an integral part of whole-school planning.
5. The Framework is based on evidence from research and teacher practice.

Molina Roldán et al.(2021) asserts that all learners benefit from a classroom dedicated to inclusive education. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2007) provides guidelines for teachers at post-primary level to promote inclusive education. These foster teachers' awareness of the Framework. A separate document is available for the core subjects of English and Maths, as well as many other subjects, but there is no document available relating to the Irish language although it is a compulsory subject (NCCA, 2007).

The *Center for Applied Special Technology* (CAST, 2024) explains that the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) is a design cornerstone of universal design for learning (UDL) . UDL was originally established by CAST in the mid-1980s (Flood & Banks, 2021). The UDL framework is based on seven principles which were agreed by academic staff at the end of the last century (Connell et al., 1997). UDL's aim is to organise lessons so that a wide range of learners can benefit from the lesson. A summary of the principles are provided below (Burgstahler and Cauce, 2020).

- i. Balance: the lesson should cater for learners across a range of abilities.
- ii. Flexibility: the lesson should be variable to accommodate different students.
- iii. Simple and intuitive: any equipment employed as part of the task should be easy to use.
- iv. Perceptible information: information should be observable to people even if they have a physical impairment.
- v. Tolerance for error: the emphasis should be put on effort and the deficit method should be avoided.
- vi. Low physical effort: people should not be fatigued at the end of the lesson.
- vii. Size and space: the size and space of the room should be suitable for a wide variety of people.

Along with UDL, differentiation can be used to support inclusive education (Tomlinson, 2014). Differentiation is a reactive system in which the teacher provides specific work for the various students in the class. This work is based on their abilities, language resources and additional needs (Tomlinson, 2014). In contrast to differentiation, UDL is proactive and inclusivity is an integral part of planning (Galkienė & Monkevičienė, 2021)

Introduction to Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL)

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) has been discussed extensively among teachers in Ireland and is studied by many students as part of their initial teacher education (Ó Duibhir, 2016). TBLL and CLIL are related and overlap significantly (Kamal et al., 2024). Under both methods, it is understood that it is not possible to separate the language and its meaning from each other (Lopes, 2020).

The literature strongly describes TBLL as an effective approach to developing the skills of speech interaction (Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Nget et al., 2020; Rahmah, 2017; Universitas Terbuka & Panduwangi, 2021). Oral communication provides many opportunities to engage the learner with SEN (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). In the CLIL lesson, the target language is linked to a second school subject; for example, learning new vocabulary in Irish within a history topic. (Banegas et al., 2025; Mac Gearailt et al., 2023b)

TBLL is a learning method with a focus on output and interaction (East, 2021). Within TBLL, students are engaged in activities based on an information gap. They should be engaged in work that is connected to the real world (Jackson, 2022). For example, they can be carrying out tasks related to reading timetables, LEGO or Minecraft. Other real life examples include creating a poster, producing a newsletter, video, or pamphlet, or designing a map. This incorporates UDL principles because it allows students to present their learning in different ways using different mediums.

Input is not limited to the written word within TBLL; in addition, interactive communication is central, with a particular focus on the negotiation (Van den Branden, 2006a; East, 2021). This largely reconciles with the UDL principle of recommending the use of different methods of interpreting the information (CAST, 2024).

Before designing the TBLL task, the language needs of learners should be assessed (Grote & Oliver, 2022; Ship, 2005). Duran and Ramaut (2010) state that TBLL can be used to teach lessons at level A1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This is the level suitable for complete beginners (Council of Europe, 2020).

How can TBLL promote inclusion?

The ways of using TBLL to support the acquisition of Irish as a second language for students with SEN are discussed here. With regard to TBLL, Bygate (2020) stresses that relevant research should not be driven by a theoretical framework but should focus much more on the needs of teachers and students in the classroom.

Chan (2022) provides a specific description of the elements needed to adapt TBLL as a teaching method that is inclusive for learners with SEN. Chan (2022) explains that there are five factors to be considered in detail when trying to design lessons that are aligned to TBLL and which are inclusive at the same time. This topic is strongly aligned with the Inclusive Education Framework (National Council for Special Education, 2011). The five factors are described below (Chan, 2022).

- i. An educational ecology should be established in the classroom allowing space for all students, that is to say, the tasks should be designed within a UDL framework.
- ii. The input should not be limited to language input (This very much aligns with the multi-modal input recommended in the Junior Cycle Specification (T2) (Department of Education, 2023).
- iii. The output should not be limited to spoken language, but rather gestures, facial expressions and body language should also be used.
- iv. Equipment or props should be used together with cognitive tools (such as diagrams or mind maps) so that more people are able to make sense of the input and so forth from the task.
- v. Consultancy: evidence-based approaches which were developed with the SEN learner at the centre should be used.

The following are some sample strategies which could be used within inclusive teaching: finger spelling (for example for those with a hearing impairment) (Walsh-Aziz et al., 2023), visual accommodations and breaking down the steps of the task so that only small parts are to be completed in one session. (Ellis et al., 2019).

Multisensory learning is an educational approach with a particular focus on audio-visual resources as well as on kinesthetic learning where students are active while they are learning (Eroğlu et al., 2022). Literature also states that TBLL can help foster multi-sensory learning (Schrooten, 2006) and this creates a space for students with dyslexia to access and improve their ability to speak Irish.

As part of his vital work Krashen (1986) uses a metaphor of affective filter to describe the influence of emotions on the development of the target language in particular on the spoken language. Krashen (1986) asserts that anxiety is reduced if students are working without full focus on the grammatical rules. A longitudinal study from Zehan et al. (2021) found this to be the case when TBLL is used. The results of this study are based on data derived from a self-report of 34 students.

Relevant literature suggests that computer-assisted language learning (CALL) can be used as a basis for TBLL (González-Lloret, 2017). The author claims that TBLL is “ideal for informing and fully realising the potential of technological innovations for language learning.” Systematic analysis of 1799 publications (González-Lloret, 2017, p. 234) confirms that adaptive technology is one of the main themes recently discussed in research related to TBLL (Jia & Bava Harji, 2023). The link between adaptive technology and TBLL illustrates various ways of using this teaching method to support the UDL.

Practical ways to connect TBLL and UDL

Strengthening digital access to tasks greatly expands the capacity of TBLL to facilitate inclusive education (Vasinda & Pilgrim, 2022). One of the most powerful adaptive technologies that make reading material available to more people are audiobooks. (Almgren Bäck et al., 2024) There are some available for both young learners and teenagers online.

For example, a teacher working with images as part of the task in a TBLL lesson could add an alternative text (*alt text*) to each of them (Huntsman, 2022). This is a resource that describes the appearance or function of an image on a webpage, it is beneficial to the learner with a visual impairment, helping them to make sense of the task.

If a video or short film is used as part of a task, a transcript of the dialogue should be provided for students with hearing impairment. The transcripts can be used to add a subtitle to the video (Venturini et al., 2022). If the assignment is based on the jigsawing (supplying each student within the group with part of the necessary information) an audio file could be provided to students that have difficulty with reading (Almumen, 2020). Synthetic voices can be used to facilitate the translation from text to speech; Trinity College Dublin has developed an Irish language synthesizer (www.abair.ie).

CONCLUSION

Teachers designing TBLL lessons must understand the learners' language needs (Long, 2005). The work in the classroom should be based on educational tasks that are linked to knowledge related to the language needs of the students (Grote & Oliver, 2022). In order to achieve this, in the case of Irish, research must be carried out where students at post-primary level are closely listened to, resulting in a better understanding of their Irish language learning needs. Furthermore, research should be done to use technology to support the TBLL on an inclusive basis when learning Irish as a second language.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

To implement the Specification (L2) for Junior Cycle, a range of resources that are aligned with TBLL as a teaching method will need to be developed (NCCA, 2023). Therefore, a repository should be established on a collaborative basis among teachers across the country. To do this correctly, it is necessary to research the needs of post-primary students in relation to Irish language-learning so that a valuable suite of tasks is developed, in keeping with the interests and objectives of the students.

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