

Effective conversational practice in an Icelandic LMOOC

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Abstract

This paper presents a course design that aims to effectively integrate conversational practice into an Icelandic Language Massive Open Online Course (LMOOC). Additionally, it introduces an ongoing survey study investigating the perceptions and engagement of learners (n = 60) in live oral communication sessions that are offered within the program's specific distance learning mode. The study aimed to: a) ascertain whether students are motivated to participate in the optional group sessions; b) identify the main factors that motivate them to participate in these sessions; c) determine whether the live sessions fulfill their expectations; and d) identify why some students choose not to attend the live sessions offered. Results indicate that most of the participants in the study took advantage of the opportunity and attended some or all of the conversation classes offered. The results also show that attendees were primarily motivated by the opportunity to practice communication and pronunciation in the target language. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that most of the participants in both courses highly valued the live sessions, finding them to either meet or surpass their expectations. Regarding non-attendees, data suggests that scheduling constraints and anxiety about speaking and meeting others posed challenges for some individuals.

Keywords: *conversational practice, LMOOCs, distance learning mode, human tutor support, Icelandic Online.*

1. Introduction

Because they are open to an unlimited number of participants, LMOOCs pose great challenges in technical, pedagogical, and practical terms when it comes to providing speaking opportunities for L2 learners. Drawing upon existing literature, several LMOOCs have experimented with diverse approaches to increase oral communication within these learning environments. Gimeno-Sanz (2017) reported on an LMOOC where students initiated spontaneous interactions and peer support naturally emerged. This led the course designers to organize both instructor-led sessions and learner-driven speaking practice sessions in Google Hangouts. Appel and Pujolà (2021) implemented an eTandem language learning approach, including tutors' support, to incorporate speaking interaction within LMOOCs. That design enables students to develop the necessary competences for engaging in online synchronous speaking interaction with native/near-native speakers of their

target languages. Bárkányi (2021) demonstrates the integration of speaking practice in LMOOCs through the utilization of voice recording tools, where students share links to their recordings in discussion forums and invite instructors and peers to provide feedback. A recent critical review of LMOOC design features (Chong et al., 2022) noted that one of the primary limitations of LMOOCs is the lack of opportunities they afford for instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction.

This paper introduces student perceptions of a course design aimed at effectively integrating conversational practice into the LMOOC program Icelandic Online (IOL) (<https://icelandiconline.com>) by incorporating a virtual social space for both instructor-learner and learner-learner interactions. The paper presents a survey study focused on learners' experiences and usage of the specific oral communication sessions that are now provided within the program. IOL was developed at the University of Iceland for second/foreign-language learners of Icelandic and comprises comprehensive and organized online language learning materials. The program provides seven free and open consecutive courses that are self-guided and interactive. IOL's learning material can be accessed through a variety of learning modes, all of which are based on self-directed asynchronous learning: an open non-tutorial mode, a distance learning mode, and a blended learning mode. The distance learning mode, which is the focus of this study, was developed specifically to allow particular target groups in IOL to receive individual guidance and support from a human tutor and is run independently of the basic open massive course (Friðriksdóttir 2018, 2021a, 2021b). The two distance learning courses, IOL 1 (beginner level), and IOL 2 (lower intermediate level), are run for eight weeks at a time and are offered five times a year. These courses provide students with comprehensive web-based learning materials. Additionally, students are given the option to complete 12 written assignments that are embedded in the learning content, which are then reviewed and critiqued by a dedicated tutor. The courses finish with an optional online final exam. While the current IOL system is limited by its inability to provide effective conversational practice, the course content was recently expanded to include optional weekly hour-long live sessions where students can meet with a native instructor and peers in a virtual classroom on Zoom during the evening hours, Icelandic local time. Prior to the live sessions, students receive level-specific teaching materials closely aligned with the web-based course content they are also working on. These materials prepare students to actively engage in the upcoming sessions.

The following research questions guided this ongoing survey study: a) Did students enrolled in two different courses, IOL 1 and IOL 2, demonstrate motivation to participate in optional weekly group sessions for oral interaction in the target language?; b) what were the primary factors that motivated students to take part in these live sessions?; and c) did the sessions meet the participants' expectations? Also, the study sought to investigate d) why certain students did not take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the offered live sessions.

2. Method

To comprehend learner engagement and perceptions in the specific live oral communication sessions in focus, an anonymous post-course online questionnaire in English was distributed. The survey was sent to registered students ($n = 152$) enrolled in two distance courses, IOL 1 and IOL 2, offered between January 2021 and April 2023. The questionnaire included ten questions (most of them multiple choice) using a three- to five-point Likert scale. The survey items were primarily developed based on informal feedback obtained from previous learners' comments and complaints regarding specific elements (or lack of) of the IOL web-based learning materials. This feedback was collected through emails, learners' written assignments, as well as final exams administered within the web-based course (Section 1).

The target population included both those who had attended 1-8 live sessions over this period of time and also those who did not attend any live session but had been active in other aspects of their courses. A total of 60 students responded to the survey in full or in part: 37 in the IOL 1 course (out of 102 who were invited) and 23 in the IOL 2 course (out of 50 invited). Some of the students in IOL 2 had previously completed the IOL 1 course and had also attended the live sessions offered in that course. The respondent sample is varied and includes participants from three different continents. The largest age group in IOL 1 was 35-44 years old and in IOL 2 it was 45-54. Of the study population, over 60% of the participants in both courses were female. The

questionnaire incorporated a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. However, due to space constraints in this article, only a subset of the collected data will be presented. The unshared data comprises qualitative insights gathered by prompting learners to describe the most valuable aspects of the course's live sessions and suggest enhancements. Nevertheless, this paper provides a glimpse into this qualitative data in the following section.

3. Results

3.1 Participation in live sessions

Table 1 data reveals that the majority of participants attended 7-8 live sessions, with 48.7% in IOL 1 and 78.3% in IOL 2. A smaller percentage attended 4-6 sessions (16.2% in IOL 1 and 13% in IOL 2), while 18.9% in IOL 1 engaged in 1-3 sessions. Additionally, 16.2% in IOL 1 and 8.7% in IOL 2 did not attend any live sessions.

Table 1. Participation in live sessions in IOL 1 and IOL 2.

Total live sessions attended	IOL 1 (n = 37)	IOL 2 (n = 23)
7-8 live sessions	48.7% (n = 18)	78.3% (n = 18)
4-6 live sessions	16.2% (n = 6)	13% (n = 3)
1-3 live sessions	18.9% (n = 7)	0%
No live sessions	16.2% (n = 6)	8.7% (n = 2)

3.2 Motivating factors for attendance

With regards to the key motivating factors that prompted students to attend the live sessions, a significant proportion of participants in both IOL 1 and IOL 2 identified the opportunity to practice Icelandic conversation as the primary driving force. In IOL 1, 84% and in IOL 2, 90% recognized this as the main reason for their active participation, as shown in Table 2. Similarly, 80% in IOL 1 and 70% in IOL 2 valued practicing Icelandic pronunciation. Seeking assistance from a human tutor motivated 68% in IOL 1 and 70% in IOL 2. Additionally, the opportunity to seek guidance from the tutor on various aspects of the language was considered important by 40% in IOL 1 and 50% in IOL 2. Conversely, the aspect of connecting with fellow students in the course was deemed less significant, with only 20% of respondents in IOL 1 and 15% in IOL 2 identifying it as an important factor for attendance.

Table 2. Main reasons for attending the live sessions in IOL 1 and IOL 2.

Motivating factors	IOL 1 (n = 25)	IOL 2 (n = 19)
To practice Icelandic conversation	84% (n = 21)	90% (n = 18)
To practice Icelandic pronunciation	80% (n = 20)	70% (n = 14)
To get assistance from a human tutor	68% (n = 17)	70% (n = 14)
To ask the tutor about different aspects of the language	40% (n = 10)	50% (n = 10)
To meet other students in the course	20% (n = 5)	15% (n = 3)

3.3 Participants' expectations

As for the question of whether the sessions met participants' expectations, Table 3 shows that 72% of the learners in IOL 1 and 90% in IOL 2 reported that the live sessions either met or surpassed their expectations. In the IOL 1 course, 24% indicated that the sessions fell below their expectations.

Table 3. Categories of participants' expectations in IOL 1 and IOL 2.

Participants' expectations	IOL 1 (n = 25 ¹)	IOL 2 (n = 20)
Exceeded expectations	24% (n = 6)	25% (n = 5)
Met expectations	48% (n = 12)	65% (n = 13)
Below expectations	24% (n = 6)	0%

3.4 Demotivating factors for attendance

Table 4 presents insights based on data from the eight survey respondents who indicated that they did not attend any of the live sessions. The primary reason cited by both groups for not attending the live sessions was timing. This reason was expressed by both of the students in IOL 2 and by 66.7% of the participants in IOL 1. Furthermore, three of the IOL 1 learners expressed that anxiety related to speaking Icelandic and socializing with fellow students posed challenges. Additionally, one IOL 1 learner mentioned a preference for independent study.

Table 4. Main reason for not attending live sessions in IOL 1 and IOL 2.

Demotivating factors	IOL 1 (n = 6)	IOL 2 (n = 2)
The scheduled time of the live sessions was unfortunate for me	66.7% (n = 4)	100% (n = 2)
I was anxious about speaking Icelandic	33.3% (n = 2)	0%
I was anxious about meeting others	16.7% (n = 1)	0%
I prefer to study on my own	16.7% (n = 1)	0%

Finally, due to space limitations, only two quotes from learners are presented here to address the data obtained from the survey's open-ended questions asking about personal views towards the live sessions. On the one hand, a respondent explained the key takeaway from the course's sessions: "I learned how to communicate person to person and how to speak." On the other, another student suggested an improvement for the sessions: "It would be great to have an additional native speaker for small conversations."

¹ Note: One respondent in IOL 1 and two in IOL 2 chose the 'other (specify)' option and added comments.

Discussion

Based on the data presented, the majority of participants in the study took advantage of the opportunity and attended either all or some of the live sessions offered in the two LMOOC courses under investigation. The results reveal that the primary motivating factors for attendees were the chance to practice communication in Icelandic and improve their pronunciation. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that the availability of a human tutor who can answer questions and offer guidance regarding the target language also played a role in attracting learners to the live sessions. Additionally, the findings indicate that a significant number of participants in both courses held the live sessions in high regard, stating that they either met or exceeded their expectations. Regarding the non-attendees in the study, the data suggests that some individuals encountered challenges attending due to the timing of the live sessions. However, resolving this matter is not straightforward as the program consistently has students in multiple time zones around the world. In addition, a few non-attendees in the beginner course expressed social apprehension and anxiety about speaking the target language, widely recognized barriers that prevent numerous learners from fully engaging in speaking activities within language learning environments (Bárkányi, 2021).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study contributes significant data on the design of an LMOOC that successfully integrates communication practice within the learning environment. It specifically highlights a tutored distance mode of delivery as a means of achieving this integration. Specifically, the study investigates how learners perceive and engage with live oral communication sessions provided in such a learning mode. This study's findings have practical implications for LMOOC designers and instructors, and offer ideas of effective integration of oral communication practice within such learning environments.

To overcome the limitations of the small sample size in the present study, future research should focus on conducting follow-up studies with larger sample sizes to gather data from a more extensive range of live sessions.

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