

Focus on the Learner in Irish - a novel idea

- (Very) brief history of the language
- Overview of the teaching of Irish
- CALL
- Learner attitude
- Recent developments
- Survey report
- CALL and the Irish learner
- General conclusions



(Very) Brief History of Irish

???? - 1169: Irish in common use

1366: Statues of Kilkenny - discrimination against the use of Irish

1601: Battle of Kinsale - loss of Irish-speaking nobility

(90% of population spoke Irish)

17?? - 18??: Revival

18?? - 1915: Links with nationalism

1916 - 1922: Proclamation of the Republic and Partition

1922 - 2003: Equal status in the constitution of the Rep of Ireland

Speakers: 10,000 - > 1,000,000 (depending on definition)



Overview of the Teaching of Irish

- Objectives:
 - maintain as a national language
 - heritage reasons
 - needs of learner not taken into consideration (in the past)
- Category:
 - LCTL (but really MCTL in Ireland)
 - same limited resources as other LCTLs



Learner Attitude

- Compulsory subject
 - “forced upon student”, no choice
 - “need” for government jobs (resentment)
 - minority language: useless
 - difficult language (complex morphology)
- previously pedagogically “boring”
 - audio/visual method
 - modern language teaching techniques not used - why?



Recent Developments

- 1999 - new Irish Curriculum
 - communicative method
 - more conversation, more fun for student
 - more work for the teacher
 - aims to address needs of students of a range of abilities
- outcome
 - a bit early but
 - some success



Students Attitude to Irish

- Previous survey (Harris & Murtagh, 1999)
 - students “support” the idea of Irish in theory, but not in reality
 - attitude very important to learning outcome (as are natural ability, parental attitude)
 - weak students particularly disadvantaged
- Conclusion:
 - need for new materials, curriculum, themes
 - only one minor mention of IT!



Project Report

- Aim:
 - to see if the use of CALL materials increases learner motivation/interest
- Primary schools
 - 1 “standard” school (4 classes, ranging in age from 7 - 11)
 - 1 disadvantaged school (1 class, age 7 - 9)
- Method:
 - surveyed students anonymously on attitudes to Irish
 - developed CALL materials *with* the students (especially sound)
 - surveyed attitudes after use of CALL materials
 - developed *in conjunction* with teachers



Pre-CALL Survey Report

5th class (10-11 years): Sample size = 62

Do you like Irish? No (31%) Not Really (13%) S'times (47%) Yes (9%)

Do you enjoy Irish class? No (27%) Sometimes (60%) Always (13%)

I would like to learn Irish by doing ... Games (34%) Fun (23%)

I don't like Irish because ... Hard (53%) Boring (27%)

2nd/3rd class (7 - 9 years): Sample size = 41

Do you like Irish? No (12%) S'times (42%) Yes (46%)

How would you improve teaching? Games (46%) Fun (29%)

Is Irish important? No (12%) Maybe (29%) Yes (73%)



Student Needs from Pre-Test Survey

- Like:
 - reading, poems, questions
- Don't like
 - reading, questions
- Change teaching by doing:
 - games, reading ... make it fun
- Change teaching by not doing
 - reading
- Favourite part
 - reading, poems



Student Comments: Pre-Test Survey

- *Why do we have to learn more Irish? Don't kill me - I'm only ten.*
- *It's boring, put a bit of life in it.*
- *I think learning verbs is not as effective as speaking it fluently.*
- *Teacher should explain more.*
- *I wish Irish wasn't so hard.*
- Other negative comments
- Note: smaller class with v. interested teacher (disadvantaged area) - more positive towards Irish



CALL

- Computer Assisted Language Learning
 - range from a simple tool (e.g. spell checker) to complete tutor for the independent learner
- Addresses need for language learning resources
- Difficult for Most Commonly Taught Languages
 - multi-disciplinary: linguists, teachers, technical people
- Even more difficult for LCTLs and Endangered Languages

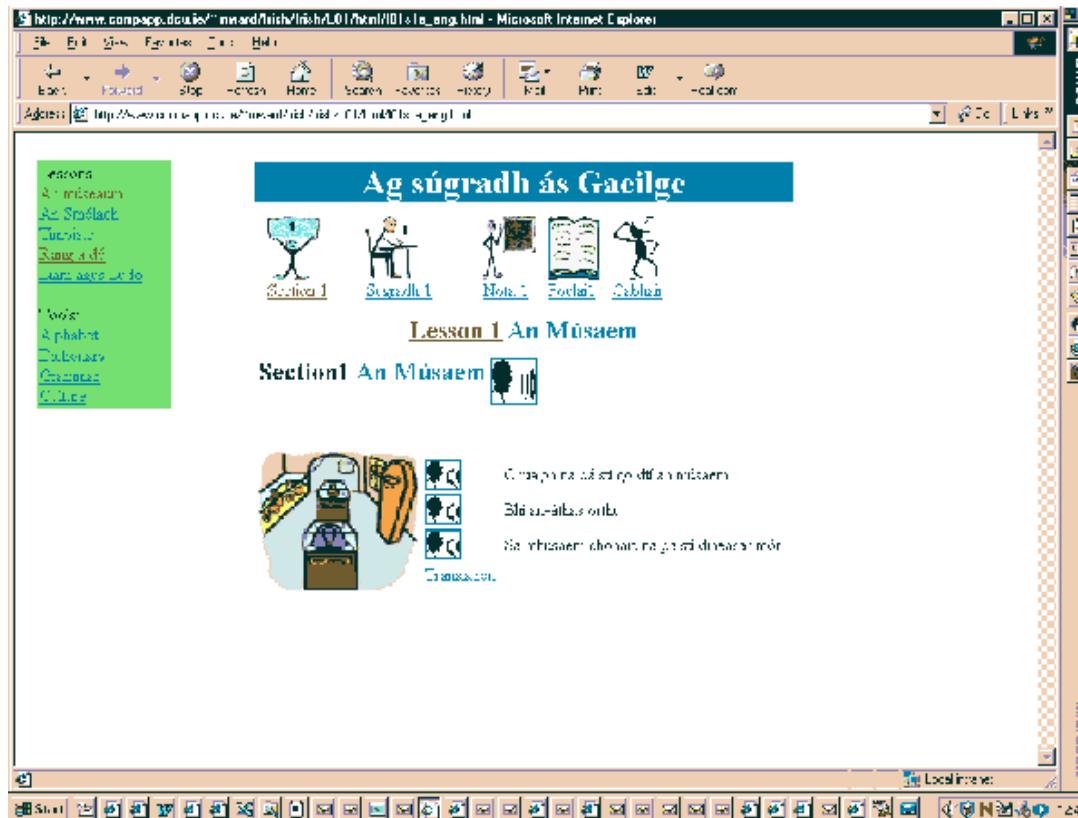


CALL - Benefits for the Learner

- Increased motivation
- Privacy
- Multi-media presentation of materials
- Learner pace
- Learner's own learning style



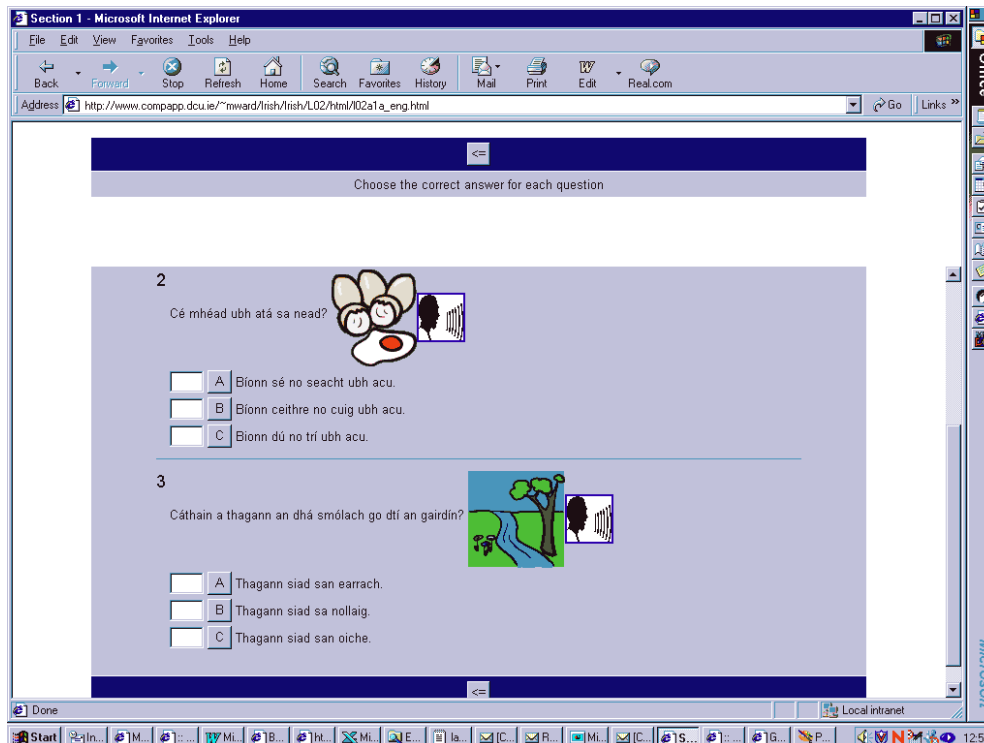
Sample Section Page



School of Computer Applications
National Centre for Language Technology



Sample Game Page



Post-CALL Survey Report

- Note: Provisional results
 - positive (but must consider initial enthusiasm)
- Results: Sample size = 103 (pre)/98 (post)
 - most students “sometimes” liked Irish (45%/56%)
 - most students enjoyed Irish on the computer (53%)
 - the majority of students would like to learn more Irish on the computer (57%)
 - the majority of students would prefer to use the computer or a combination of computer/classroom for learning Irish (84%)
 - many students said that the computer would make them more interested in Irish (41% maybe, 46% yes)



Cross-curriculum

- National school teachers recommendation:
 - use of computers should be cross-curriculum
- use of CALL materials can also be cross-curriculum
 - language (all, extra spoken dimension)
 - computers
 - art work
 - social skills
 - fun



Observations

- errors should be ironed out (*mea culpa*)
- students like the games element best (surprise!)
 - matching was “easy”
 - multiple-choice was “good fun/too easy”
 - writing was “harder”
- comfortable headphones required
- students might need more guidance
 - younger students especially (7-9 years)
 - attention levels
- all students had necessary (minimal) computer skills



Concluding comment

- CALL can be used to enhance the student's learning experience
- CALL can portray a more modern image of a language, which can be especially important for LCTLs
- the development of CALL materials is not easy, but a pragmatic approach can lead to the development of useful, reusable lessons
- attitude to the language can influence learning
 - perhaps CALL can foster a positive and helpful attitude amongst students

