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

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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%)

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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

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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