

NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS in IRELAND

Bill Richardson
Dublin City University

1. General Introduction

This paper reports on some of the developments that have taken place in the learning and teaching of languages at third level in Ireland in recent years, especially in relation to developments in the use of Information and Computer Technology.

In order to gain this insight into the New Learning Environments for language learning, approximately eighty departments were asked to complete questionnaires indicating the resources available to them and their students, their preferred teaching methods and any suggestions they may have for further developments in the New Learning Environments. This overview cannot represent all the current developments occurring in Ireland today but it does provide us with an insight into some of the progress made in relation to New Learning Environments throughout Ireland, in the context of the many social, economic and political changes which have been taking place in the country.

2. The role of New Learning Environments in language teaching and learning

Advances in ICT have brought about the introduction into third-level language learning of CALL programmes, use of the Internet and the use of CD-ROM. These have resulted in increased learner autonomy and have helped to move the centre of attention in the classroom from the teacher to the student. This poses some challenges for teachers as they face the need to retrain and become more familiar with new equipment to encourage more effective and independent learning on the student's part. At the same time teachers are responsible for the design of new courses that integrate these developments.

2.1 The integration of New Learning Environments in language teaching and learning for language students, students of other disciplines and as a preparation for professional life

The training and usage of the equipment will prepare the students for their future professions with a competence in the use of technology. The language skills they acquire will enable them to work in a variety of environments and the independent approach they learn through their studies will allow them to function confidently in their future careers. The integration of ICT into their Learning Environments will help to create a more rounded education with the students prepared for any path they choose to follow after their study.

The survey shows that the traditional method of face-to-face teaching continues to be the most popular mode of teaching among the various departments and third-level institutions in the Republic of Ireland, using computer technology as a support tool. There is no general policy on the use of ICT, and the degree to which it is used depends more on the individual teacher. However, most institutions make ICT facilities available to their students.

As the majority of the students studying languages are between the ages of 18 and 25 it is possible to gear many lessons towards the interests of this age group. In many cases, ICT is used to explore subject-specific authentic materials.

Language lecturers in Dublin City University have devised a new curriculum for those students taking a language with another discipline. Their course is more theory oriented and student centred. They have also designed project-based modules for all the students to provide them with language skills and other skills that can be used in the workplace or in other environments. In these courses teachers seek the expertise of students to develop and create materials such as web pages or CALL materials. DCU has also introduced the use of tandem learning, in their language modules with partner third-level institutions

in Spain. University College Dublin also make use of tandem learning and ICT for distance learning and communication with other EU universities.

Students studying for the postgraduate diploma in teacher education (the Higher Diploma in Education) at the various universities receive training in the methodologies of teaching those languages which are included in the national curriculum. The ICT training they receive is useful for their professional careers as it enables them to introduce this into their teaching methods at school.

University College Dublin has developed a range of courses in languages for specific purposes, which are designed to meet the language needs of students of non-linguistic disciplines.

Several universities, including NUI Galway, have introduced courses in French for students of Science, Engineering and Business Studies.

2.2 Policies underlying the integration of New Learning Environments

Dublin City University is developing the concept of an e-university and this policy is being integrated into all the disciplines. There are plans to install WebCT (or an equivalent system) for the introduction of a web-based course and management system.

Some institutions (including University College Dublin, University College Cork and NUI Maynooth) have established Language Centres to cater for demand for language courses for students of different disciplines.

In general, each department appears to work according to their own specific needs and agendas. Departments and individual teachers are responsible for the integration of New Learning Environments.

2.3 New learning strategies: the introduction and promotion of independent learning

The National Distance Education Centre (Oscail), based at Dublin City University, provides distance learning for adults who have not previously studied in Higher Education or for those who have difficulties participating in other programmes due to personal disabilities. There are currently more than 3,500 people in Ireland studying in this programme. It offers a wide variety of courses in the Arts, Science and Nursing and there are plans to introduce a language course this year (2001).

The Training and Employment Authority, Fas, offer courses online for adult learners in their Net College. Their subjects include web-design, business skills and officedesk-top application courses. Although it does not offer any courses in languages it shows great potential to do so in the future.

2.4 Facilities for independent learning

Most Irish universities offer students access to a Language Centre where they can view videos and use CALL facilities.

2.5 Development of learning materials

Most institutions report the use of ICT as a support tool in their courses. However, not all of them are involved in the development of materials or programmes.

Several departments have stated that they are in the process of developing their own programmes.

UCD is in the process of appointing a lecturer in IT in education and a research fellow who will design, develop and evaluate courses on-line. The Italian department at UCD has added CALL to its resources.

Blanchardstown Institute of Technology has developed a wide range of resources that can be accessed using CAN 8.

NUI Maynooth are also in the process of changing to a virtual language laboratory environment using CAN 8 and are currently using the Vifax learning system for Irish, French, German and Spanish.

As a self-aid package to students the Irish department in NUI Galway has developed An Irish/Gaeilge Speak Write programme.

Staff at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology are involved in a number of ICT projects. On-screen translation and sub-titling have been introduced on the Film and T.V course in conjunction with the Galway Film Centre.

The Athlone Institute of Technology has recently installed a 40-booth multimedia lab and the IT in Limerick has purchased software from Abacus Communications and they have integrated computers into their language lab. They are also in the process of introducing Satellite T.V.

Language staff at DCU are developing some web-based interactive language learning materials, which will be available in French, Spanish and German.

This is just a sample of the developments taking place in the Higher Education Institutions in Ireland. These developments, and others not listed here, reflect a commitment to continually updating learning facilities and designing effective and suitable learning environments.

2.6 Redefining the profile of the actors involved

The role of teachers is changing and increasingly they are adopting the role of "facilitators" rather than being at the centre of classroom activity. Teachers must enable students to be responsible for their own learning and encourage them to become more involved in their own learning process. Teachers must also help students to find particular learning styles. The teachers of a foreign language are also becoming trainers of the technology in their New Learning Environments and must acquire skills to develop new materials. Incentives should be put in place to motivate teachers to readapt to this new role.

The students must take a more active and independent role in their study. Collaborative learning is encouraged throughout third level institutions. In this respect traditional examinations are tending to be replaced by project work or continuous assessment.

2.7 Training programmes and courses for language teachers: in-service programmes, staff development

Most of the institutions surveyed identified staff training as a major need, with many indicating that staff currently receive no training in ICT. However, others have exposure to training in CAN 8, web design, Powerpoint, CALL etc.

Every year the IT in Blanchardstown runs programmes in CAN 8 for new staff or for permanent staff who wish to upgrade their skills. They also run training programmes for staff in other ITs. The IT in Carlow and the Dublin Institute of Technology also offer training courses for their staff and have companies present their software to them.

All the language lecturers in the GMIT are members of EUROCALL and have completed various courses in CALL offered at other institutions.

NUI Galway have recently been able to provide Science, Engineering and Business students with French lessons by creating new Applied Language Teaching posts. The staff have also had a three-day training course on 'New Technologies for Language Teaching'.

Language staff in Dublin City University have organised CALL workshops on integration, design implementation and evaluation of web-based language learning for their language staff. They have also run workshops on authoring tools. In conjunction with EUROCALL and AISHE, DCU offered a seminar by Prof. Mike Levy in August 2001 entitled "Building Bridges in CALL: teaching and research".

All the teachers at FAS receive training in the use of ICT and NUI Maynooth have suggested the introduction of an ICT training programme through the Universities Training Programme. Presently they offer two-day training courses for tutors on the use of CAN 8.

2.8 Measuring proficiency: assessment and self-assessment

The use of ICT for assessment purposes is very limited in third level institutions in the Republic of Ireland. OSCAIL and FAS have both introduced ICT for the purpose of assessment and self-

assessment. In OSCAIL students participate in debates which are later assessed by tutors, to offer an example of how ICT are integrated in this respect.

NUI Galway have also introduced ICT for assessment purposes in their First Year Arts B.A. and First Year Commerce B.A.

ICT is used by a small proportion of teachers for the assessment of interpreting and customer service skills through CAN 8. Considering the high proportion of face-to-face teaching, teachers may prefer to assess their student's oral abilities in the second language in a face-to-face assessment.

The University of Limerick has introduced the use of portfolios for assessment purposes among the students taking the postgraduate teacher training diploma, the Higher Diploma in Education. They must write and reflect on their teaching (of a second language) to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of their profession and improve their teaching and communicative skills.

2.9 Action research on the implementation of New Learning Environments

Most departments conduct research either alone or in collaboration with other universities. Particular teachers often carry out research in relation to particular project work. For many teachers of language, such as language tutors and teachers in Language Centres, research is, however, not a priority since it is not considered part of their role in the universities.

The Centre for Language and Communication Studies at Trinity College Dublin has been heavily involved in research on the use of Tandem Learning.

3. Promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity

Globalisation and increasing numbers of people entering and leaving the country have created a more diverse and multilingual Ireland. This has had an impact on the number of native teachers. Multilingualism and cultural diversity are fostered through the growing number of programmes offering exchange opportunities, both for staff and students. Encouraging students to participate in a Study Abroad scheme, and accepting a variety of nationalities into the classroom help in the promotion of a multilingual and culturally-diverse environment.

The Graduate Diploma in Intercultural Studies in DCU offers students the opportunity of studying multicultural and intercultural issues at an advanced level, The course offers a module in Language and Interculturality and students study issues relating to multiculturalism, multilingualism and language ecology.

The introduction of new technology, which allows communication between students with different native tongues and from different cultural backgrounds, such as e-mail schemes, video-conferencing, computer conferencing and on-line chats promote this environment.

3.1 Promoting the learning of the less widely used and less taught languages

French and German followed by Spanish continue to be the most popular languages taught in Ireland. However, efforts are made in a number of institutions to popularise the less widely used and taught languages. Only a small proportion of the institutions surveyed offer courses in Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch or Japanese.

Approximately one quarter of the institutions offer Irish to degree level, and NUI Galway plays a particularly important role in facilitating students who wish to study any discipline through Irish.

'Fiontar' is a dedicated centre at Dublin City University, offering academic programmes through Irish. Fiontar focuses on inter-disciplinary studies including business, computing, language and communication. In addition to taught courses, Fiontar provides facilities in an Irish-speaking environment for those who wish to engage in research.

The Department of Hispanic Studies in University College Cork offers the possibility of studying Catalan and Galician. These courses are offered with the participation of the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Xunta de Galicia. Other third-level institutions also offer the possibility of learning Portuguese.

The Linguistics Institute of Ireland (ITE) worked on the MELIN (Minority European Information Network) project in 1999, aimed at establishing a centralised world-wide web for the provision of language resources to users of lesser-used languages in the EU. The web-site was designed to have resources available in Irish, Welsh, Catalan and Basque, and was designed to cater for anybody interacting in a multilingual environment.

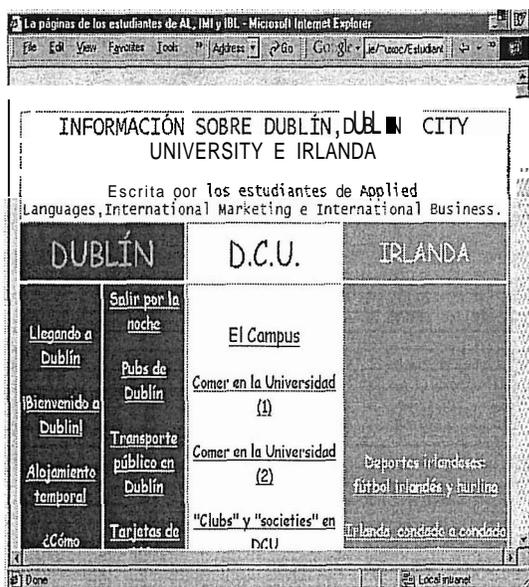
3.2 Promoting cultural understanding and intercultural awareness

Most languages programmes include modules on the history, literature and cultural aspects of the relevant countries. However, students from disciplines such as Science, Engineering or Business Studies tend to have fewer opportunities to engage in such learning than students who specialise in Languages.

Irish universities have been heavily involved in student exchanges, especially within Europe under the Erasmus and Socrates exchange schemes. Participation in these exchanges is strongest among students of Languages and students of Business and Economics.

Increased intercultural awareness has been a feature of some of the most recent developments in the teaching and learning of languages at third level. Within the majority of these language courses issues of interculturality and multiculturalism are now explicitly addressed. Frequently the focus is on the issue of immigration, which is now of relevance in Ireland, as it has been in many other European countries for a number of years.

As an academic area, Intercultural Studies has begun to emerge in a number of institutions, notably at Dublin City University, where the degree of BA in Applied Languages now comprises two strands, viz, 'Translation Studies' and 'Intercultural Studies'. Language-related courses at DCU now include a number of modules which address intercultural issues of a social, historical, linguistic or literary nature.



Along with these, modules aimed at developing language proficiency often entail exercises aimed at addressing cross-cultural issues. An example of such an activity is the web-page providing information on Dublin, DCU and Ireland prepared for visiting Spanish students by final-year students of Spanish:

[<http://webpages.dcu.ie/~uxoc/Estudiantes.htm>]

3.3 Accessing authentic resources and materials

Multimedia labs help students to access resources and materials along with satellite T.V., the libraries (which stock videos, magazines, newspapers etc.) and the Internet. The latter has become the most popular source of information amongst university students.

In some instances, students also gain access to material through tandem learning or group e-mails.

3.4 Student and staff exchanges

Programmes such as Socrates enable students to study another language in a culturally different setting. The exchange of staff and students among institutions creates a valuable experience for all the teachers and learners involved.

More than half of the classes in this survey have students from other EU countries, approximately one third have students from Northern Ireland and the UK and also from non-EU countries. This reflects the increasing mobility among those in third level education, which helps foster a multicultural and multilingual environment.

4. The role of New Learning Environments in training programmes for language and language related professions

It is necessary for language teachers to receive adequate training in relation to the needs of the students and the New Learning Environments. This is an area which has been identified as one which can be improved on, as the teachers appear to gain only minimum training in new technologies.

4.1 New Learning Environments and the training of language teachers

With the introduction of new technology the role of the language teacher is changing from the traditional one of teaching that subject alone to that of being a trainer in the use of the technology as well. It is necessary for teachers to have an intensive knowledge of all the materials and equipment available to them so that they can devise a suitable learning environment for the students' needs. This is impossible to achieve without any formal training. It is important to motivate teachers and to offer them incentives to receive training. Teachers need to be able to perform critical evaluation of materials and to have adequate knowledge of tools available.

4.2 New Learning Environments and the training of translators and interpreters

The presence of native speakers, on-screen translation and CAN 8 are all invaluable aids in the training of translators and interpreters. Scuh students also benefit from some formal training in the use of ICT.

In the case of Dublin City University, its Translation Studies programme, offered on the BA in Applied Languages, includes a number of modules aimed directly at developing relevant skills in the technologies associated with the translation profession. These modules range from introductory courses in Information Technology to more advanced modules in the management of terminology, machine translation and other dimensions of translation technology. The programme also includes a module in Screen Translation (Dubbling and Subtitling). Similar modules are also offered in DCU on the Graduate Diploma in Translation Studies.

5. The role of New Learning Environments in continuing education programmes or courses

In the light of the recent developments in Ireland and the EU Commission's encouragement and commitment to New Learning Environments, Oscale (the National Distance education Centre) has embarked on an action research exercise to form an strategy to further incorporate ICT's in its programmes.

Companies often provide their employees with training courses related to their needs and the needs of the company. There are many organisations that provide training in web design and web development. Packages offered give specialised training for IT, marketing, design and administration departments and help companies to integrate Internet technologies into the workplace.

Ireland's biggest Union, SIPTU (the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union) has a college with a department in education and training which provides courses in industrial relations, labour legislation, economics etc. These courses are available to all SIPTU members.

The Airline-Talk project (1996-2000), conducted by commercial and educational institutions, trained airline staff in English, Spanish and German. The aim of the project was to cater for the needs of the travelling public. A set of multimedia CD-ROM language training materials was developed during the project to cater for the airline industry.

6. How to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for promoting European co-operation?

Tandem learning and video-conferencing provide links with people across countries, and several of the universities and institutes of technology surveyed are making use of these communication methods.

6.1 Using ICT for co-operation in the development of programmes

E-mailing, video-conferencing and the Internet are some ways in which teachers can co-operate to develop programmes for the students. ICT is a very effective means of working together as it is fast and reliable and teachers can share their ideas, materials and familiarise themselves with the technology through increased usage.

EUROCALL-the European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (which has a national representative in Ireland), provides a European focus for the dissemination of research and development relating to the use of technologies for language learning.

6.2 Using ICT for co-operation in the delivery of programmes

Programmes can be effectively delivered through ICT, for example video-conferencing will allow those involved in the development of programmes around the world to explain and show the new technology at the same time. This saves time and money, as there is no need to travel to the other country for a face to face meeting. Confusion will be eliminated and the information can be received and delivered in a short period of time.

7. Needs in the area of New Learning Environments

Further training in the use of ICT appears to be required among all the institutions that took part in the survey.

7.1 Seen in relation to language teaching and learning

Information and Computer Technology provide both the teacher and the learner with a wealth of knowledge and aids related to the acquisition of a second language. However, inadequate training in the use of ICT is likely to limit the potential learning by a substantial amount. Appropriate training will enable the class to reach their goals with all the advantages of having a teacher as a facilitator and adequate support tools, This training will also motivate and encourage the students to further develop their skills.

7.2 Seen in relation to the promotion of multilingualism and cultural diversity

Satellite T.V and Cabled International T.V, available at most of the institutions, enable the students and teachers to access up-to-date information on changes and news happening around the world. These constitute an excellent aid for improving aural skills.

The introduction of tandem learning and video-conferencing adds to the development of multilingualism and cultural diversity.

7.3 Seen in relation to the promotion of European co-operation

Opportunities for more students to participate in exchange programmes around Europe will create a larger number of multicultural and multilingual environments, create Intercultural awareness and further the co-operation between European countries. ICT is facilitating this process.

7.4 Seen in relation to the provision of language learning to students with special educational needs

Appropriate teaching and training should be provided for teachers who have students with disabilities. Most third-level institutions in Ireland run a Disability Service Department which offers training for the staff to meet the specific needs of disabled students. There is a recognition that suitable equipment and easy access to all facilities should be available for the students concerned and some progress has been made in terms of providing relevant technology, including Braille facilities. Little has been done in relation to the provision of technology for language learning for the disabled.

8. Measures to be taken to meet the needs identified

Training, funding and space are perhaps the most urgent needs to be met.

8.1 At institutional level

Institutions need to assess what students expect to gain from their course and the best possible means of achieving this.

Adequate funding and space need to be provided in order to allow for the introduction of new facilities.

Teachers should be given enough free time to gather materials for the labs and classes and to familiarise themselves with the technology.

8.2 At regional level

Institutions in the same region could share materials, facilities and training if funding is a problem.

8.3 At national level

Funding from the government should be distributed fairly among the institutions.

Perhaps common goals of language learning should be decided at a national level to ensure more solidarity and co-operation among the departments. Even departments within the same institution appear to have different ideas and agendas on language learning.

8.4 At European level

In general, exchanges between both staff and students should be encouraged further, through the use of ICT.

9. Examples of good practice

The University of Limerick is currently working on the project, 'Oilte', in partnership with the Linguistics Institute of Ireland, DCU, Queens University and the Department of Education. The objective of this project is to develop a course to train trainers in ICT and Language Learning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. 2002 will see the end of this project with a colloquium on ICT and language learning.

DIALANG na Gaeilge, 1997-1998, added the Irish language to a 15 language computer based system to allow the autonomous language testing for adult learners of the languages of the EU.

'The Language Policy, Social Processes, and Language Reproduction in the West Cork Gaeltacht' is a study being conducted by the University of Limerick, started in 1999 and due to finish in 2001.

It is a sociolinguistic study of the Muscraí Gaeltacht. It will look at the patterns of language use and reproduction with an emphasis on the roles of societal institutions and the language policies and actions of the State.

TALLEN (Teaching and learning languages enhanced by new technologies) focuses on the integration of theory and practice in ICT and language learning. Members of staff in the University of Limerick and other universities are involved and they are also developing an in-service course for language teachers.

The Limerick Corpus of Irish English 'has UL, Mary Immaculate College and the University of Nottingham drawing together a collection of spoken and written contemporary Southern Irish English for language research and teaching purposes.

TRANSFER, 1997-2000 has created a teacher-training manual and training course for language assistants.

The TECHNE Project provides a language module (French and English) to some engineering students in DCU and the Institut National des Telecommunications, France. This is similar to the project 'Languages for Specific Purposes: Engineering and Science' in UL, 1994-1997. It developed a course in French and German for the students of Science and Engineering and led to the publication of research articles in learner autonomy and ICT and language learning.

ITE has a web page designed to provide language teachers with practical ideas on how to use computers for language learning and teaching. It also has a discussion group, which allows the teachers to discuss their ideas about language teaching and the use of technology and to exchange information on web sites or class plans.

Trinity College Dublin has been very active over the past few years in developing Tandem Learning for their students of languages. 1994-1996 brought the 'International E-Mail Tandem Network ' which promoted the learning of a foreign language in tandem via the Internet (with asynchronous and synchronous communication) .The project was extremely successful as over 20 bilingual subnets were created with the participation of 2000 students from 20 countries. Each subnet has access to the central Tandem Agency in Bochum, each has a bilingual discussion forum and each provides didactic materials for the learners in eight languages.

The ODL (Open and Distance Learning) Project entitled 'Telematics for autonomous and Intercultural Tandem Learning' was conducted from 1996 to 1998. The partners in the project worked through the Tandem Network to expand the open-access database in the Internet offering work materials on Tandem Learning for learners, teachers and organisers of tandem learning. The most recent project in this area is 'Kooperatives Lernen von Fremdsprachen im Tandem via Videokonferenzschaltungen'. 2000-2001.

The Higher Education Authority has a fund for collaborative research between Irish universities and Media Lab Europe, the Multimedia Research programme (MMRP). It is hoped that many institutions around Europe will conduct research projects together.

NUI Maynooth will host a conference in September entitled 'Language Education In Ireland. Current Practice and Future Needs', at which a number of recent developments in new language-learning environments will be reported on.