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The use of CALL in Irish language teaching: The way forward?
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The intention of this paper is to explore the issue of the availability and suitability of language learning materials for third level Irish language degree programs. A general outline of resources currently available is given and some tentative ideas are put forward on how the resource gap may begin to be bridged using CALL. Two trialled methods that explore lexical acquisition and conversational output, both with and without computer assistance, are detailed and an analysis of their relative success from both the teacher’s and the students’ point of view is presented.

Introduction

Teaching of both the language and literature elements of the Irish language and literature undergraduate degree courses at the University of Ulster has traditionally been provided via lectures, during which the material is explained to the students by the lecturer, and seminars in which issues arising from the lectures and from other material studied can be discussed by students under the guidance of a seminar tutor. Apart from the common teaching aids such as overhead projectors and, in more recent years, PowerPoint, teaching has been mostly low tech. Although the School of Languages and Literature has for many years been equipped with two analogue language laboratories and a number of TV/video sets these have not normally been incorporated into mainstream course delivery and have rather been confined to the Learning Resource Unit or Médiathèque for the purposes of independent study which is actively encouraged at all levels.
Why greater use has not been made of analogue audio and audiovisual equipment is due mainly to the serious lack of suitable resources that pertains at third level. Whereas course providers of the main modern European languages can choose from materials developed by both domestic and foreign companies (e.g., TransIt-TIGER, TeLL me More, Gramex, Clef as well as Oxford electronic dictionaries), course providers in Irish can only choose from materials provided by the domestic Irish market. This provision has always been patchy; it has traditionally been directed only at the primary and post-primary sectors and has usually come about through small Irish government funded schemes. A number of commercially orientated packages that are aimed at casual adult-learners have come on the market over the past 50 years. These packages mainly consist of role-plays that incrementally build the learner’s knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; they generally contain a book and an audio, or audiovisual tape and are aimed at independent learners who apparently should never need the services of an Irish teacher. They are not adaptable for use as part of undergraduate degree courses as most undergraduates will have past beyond their highest level of competence. The most recent examples of such packages are: Cúrsa Closamhairc Gaeilge (Mac Gabha ñn, 1991), Irish on your own (originally published by Gael Media as Now your talking) (Ó Dóna ñll, 1998), Learning Irish: An introductory self-tutor (Ó Siadhail, 1998), Turas Teanga (Ó Dóna ñll, 2004) and Buntu’s Cainte: First steps in spoken Irish (Ó Domhnalláin, 2005).

As regards Irish language programming on television and radio, students in the north of Ireland have, until very recently, been at a considerable disadvantage compared with their counterparts in the south. Although a state sponsored, dedicated Irish language television channel, Teilifís na Gaeilge (Irish/Gaelic Television) later TG4, was established in 1996, it was not available in the north of the country until March 2005, even though it was available free-to-air in the south since its inception. This extension of provision to the north of Ireland was negotiated as part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, in which it was agreed that a north/south implementation body be set up to promote both the Irish language and the Ulster Scots language. Foras na Gaeilge was established to facilitate these goals and was in the vanguard of promoting Irish language broadcasting, especially with regard to TG4. The channel itself provides a rich diet of news and current affairs, drama, and sporting coverage through the medium of Irish as well as the now obligatory lifestyle programming. In the north, Irish language programming on radio has been much better catered for than on television. BBC Radio Ulster broadcasts a mixture of magazine and music shows seven evenings per week which, while of a good standard themselves, only amount to an average total of five regular hours per week and therefore only realistically benefit the most determined of students.² RTÉ Rádió na Gaeltachta (i.e., Irish speaking community radio) broadcasts Irish medium programming 24 hours a day, seven days a week and can be picked up in all parts of Ireland and worldwide via the Internet (www.rte.ie/rnag/), but ironically its content is of such a high standard as to be intimidating to even advanced learners; it must also be noted that much of its programming does not appeal to the younger college going audience. All in all, northern students have been more reliant on formal education to deliver the language
to them, i.e., they depend on teachers to filter the stream of Irish language programming on television and radio in order to provide them with the most interesting items on offer.

A wealth of media programming and literature encompassing prose, fiction, poetry, song, biography and autobiography, treatises on history and politics as well as a growing number of Irish language newspapers and magazines, such as *Foinse*, *Lá*, *Saol*, *An tUltach*, *Comhar*, etc, await the learner who can achieve a sufficient level of linguistic competence. The challenge facing higher education teachers at present is how to bridge the resources gap while providing high quality teaching which, as dictated by the minimum standard expected by students and the higher education sector in general, must be informed by best practice in the area of language learning.

Traditional grammar/language classes can induce a passive approach to learning whereby students can potentially opt out of the course even though they may still be attending lectures. In line with the general trend within higher education towards dynamic methods such as task-based learning, that provide key language skills and promote active learning, which was a central recommendation of the Dearing Inquiry (1997, §38), the School of Languages and Literature at UU has developed two multimedia teaching laboratories which have presented teaching staff in languages with an exciting opportunity to develop sophisticated forms of classroom-based multimedia teaching that will enhance the student experience and enrich their learning. The multimedia teaching laboratories are equipped with a digitisation facility that enables the efficient production of high quality digital audiovisual media from any analogue source; a Robotel SmartClass platform (commercial web site www.robotel.ca) which has a variety of applications including an audio/audiovisual player and recorder; a lesson editor facility for managing documents, etc, as well as a visual interface which, among other things, allows the tutor to monitor progress at every student workstation and to set up audio pairings within the group.

Irish language teaching in this dynamic multimedia-learning environment was initially to be incorporated into core first and third year language modules. The challenge here was presented not by the new technology but by the need to identify suitable resources that could be adapted for use in the new labs, with the ultimate aim of taking language tuition more in the direction of active learning.

Among the resources that had been made available for independent study within the Médiathèque were *Vifax* exercises. The Irish language *Vifax* exercises are modelled on a French commercial multimedia application and are an initiative of the Language Centre at National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Language Centre staff take a news program from *TG4* one night per week and by the following afternoon, construct a set of comprehension and written grammar exercises for beginner, intermediate and advanced learners, which are then free to download from the university’s web site (www.nuim.ie/language/Vifax.html). The exercises are primarily aimed at the post-primary sector in the republic, but we have found that, with some modification, the three levels are broadly in line with our first, second and third years respectively, although some first and second year students may already be at the third level learner stage.
Working independently, our students were expected to watch the news clip on video and complete a paper worksheet, reviewing the tape as necessary, before turning to an answer sheet to self-mark their work. It was felt that these *Vifax* materials, if used under the direction of a tutor in a controlled environment, presented the best starting point for the development of a program of activity-based learning within the Irish language and literature degree courses at UU. Two methods were trialled initially; the first of these was aimed at aiding acquisition and recall of a select vocabulary in Year 2 and 3 students, the second was aimed at improving conversational output in Year 1 students. In both the focus was on active learning.

The transition from school to university is widely recognised as one of the main challenges facing both students and teachers at third level. Students arrive at university with a variety of learning styles, experiences, abilities and attainments. Evidence from focus groups had shown that many students will not have had much experience of confronting social issues outside of their own often narrow sphere of interests, let alone of analysing and discussing such issues objectively in the target language. The majority of graduates from our degree programs go on to pursue careers in primary and post-primary education or administrative and leadership roles within the general Irish language sector. We, therefore, see the ability to conduct conversations on a broad range of topics, from current affairs to personal interests, as an essential social and professional skill and an opportunity to focus on key language elements of our syllabus, especially lexical acquisition and grammar.

We were keen to find a means of providing our students with the vocabulary needed to discuss a given topic as well as the analytical skills to deconstruct an issue and form their own personal opinion. We identified *Vifax* as a highly suitable mechanism that would allow us to expose students to contemporary issues, to objective factual presentations of these issues and to rich linguistic content from native or near-native speakers of Irish in a mixture of the three main dialects of modern Irish. This mechanism would allow us to lead students through a thorough treatment of the material whereby they are required to confront those elements which they find difficult and find ways of solving problems, either independently, as part of a group or with help from the tutor.

**Method 1**

It is accepted that L2 acquisition students have the ability to initially learn a few thousand lexical items on account of their high occurrence in speech and as a result of the students’ constant contact with these words (Ellis, 1995; Sternberg, 1987). It is expected as part of the degree in Irish language and literature, however, that students should not only possess a near native-like competence in Irish but also a developed and advanced vocabulary, consisting of lexical items that may be seldom used in everyday speech yet are essential for the register associated with academic discussion. The natural and incidental acquisition of such terminology is limited on account of its low frequency in everyday language. As a result, the programme for teaching such
vocabulary during class contact hours must be effective and student-focused in order to successfully achieve our aims of improving the students’ lexical acquisition.

This comparative study will examine two methods of teaching advanced register target vocabulary to students studying Irish at the University of Ulster, that is: (i) in the traditional classroom-based format; and (ii) in a multimedia environment. The results will identify which of these pedagogical approaches is statistically most effective in developing lexical acquisition skills, and will, as a result, provide us with a tentative direction in developing a model that could be implemented in our courses.

The purpose of the study was to ascertain which method of teaching target vocabulary would be most successful in the short term. Forty students studying Irish at UU were asked to be the subjects for this research. Individuals were taken from Year 2 and Year 3 of the course and divided into two groups of 20, with an equal distribution of students from the two years placed in each group. The first group was placed in the multimedia-learning environment (Lab Group) and the second in a traditional classroom setting (Non-lab Group).

A VIFAX exercise was used as the class text and consisted of a news segment that provided a synopsis of the most salient issues of the week including: an Al-Qaeda attack on US soldiers in Iraq; a French legislative bill aimed at banning religious emblems in schools and a plane crash in the United Arab Emirates. A comprehension exercise was also provided containing questions focused on this specialised vocabulary. This material was suitable for the study for several reasons. Firstly, it introduced three new contemporary topics that the students had not previously discussed in a class setting; secondly, content material was in the broad domain of international affairs, which was outside the usual scope of class material, i.e., parochial—national issues; and finally, it presented information containing accurate, relevant vocabulary, which could be analysed prior to answering language-focused questions.

The material was presented to the Lab Group as a digitised audiovisual clip (Mpeg). The students had control of the media player and could review the clip as minutely as they felt necessary in order to view select images or hear specific audio. No transcript of the narrative was provided. Comprehension questions were made available in a Microsoft Word document. Students had access to the various lexicographical and grammar resources on the Internet and were also permitted to use bilingual dictionaries, grammar texts and other relevant reference works in hard copy. The Non-lab Group, then, were given a transcript of the news clip and the same comprehension questions in paper format. They were given access to exactly the same reference texts in hard copy in order to assist them in completing this task.

After a period of two months, the two subject groups were asked to sit a vocabulary test. The test consisted of 20 words (nouns, adjectives, verbal adjectives, adverbs) that were gleaned from the target language featured in the original comprehension material. The items were read aloud by a native speaker of Irish as single words and then within an appropriate and relevant sample context. This process was repeated
twice. Subjects were then asked to complete three tasks to assess their literacy, knowledge of the material and depth of semantic understanding, i.e.:

- To reproduce the word in written form.
- To show knowledge of the word by providing a definition, synonym or translation.
- To illustrate the word in a context which showed another meaning of the word.

Results were then marked and quantified in statistical form. It was clear that after the two-month period there were some significant differences between the two groups. Table 1 below shows the results of the three questions posed to subjects as part of the vocabulary test.

**Word Recognition**

The most salient difference is the fact that those candidates who encountered the target language in written format (Non-lab Group) successfully retained almost 90% of the material i.e., on average every student reproduced 18 of the 20 items. This high retention rate was in stark contrast to those subjects in the Lab Group who were only able to successfully reproduce three fifths of the target material (61%), or 12 of the 20 words. The initial inference which could be drawn is that the association with the target language was stronger when the material was presented textually rather than audiovisually, and that this is the reason why the Non-lab Group literacy was much more accurate. The fact that the students in the Lab Group actually had access to more reference materials than the Non-lab Group, e.g., online resources, appears to support this suggestion. However, feedback in the focus groups showed that students displayed an unwillingness to consult reference material even when they were available. This suggests that in reality the opposite may be true; the Lab Group may have made such an effective association with the material when presented audiovisually that they saw no reason to consult the dictionary in order to check the meaning of the words and thus, indirectly missed the opportunity to acquire the correct spelling. This second possibility seems the more logical explanation as evidenced by the fact that on many occasions students in the Lab Group recognised

| Table 1. Comparison of pedagogical approaches involved in lexical acquisition |
|-------------------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
|                                                 | Non-lab group | Lab group                      |
|                                                 | N  | %   | N  | %   |
| Word recognition                                | 280| 88% | 194| 61% |
| Knowledge of word                               | 190| 59% | 173| 54% |
| Additional meaning                              | 58 | 18% | 122| 38% |
| Total lexical items                             | 320| 100%| 320| 100%|
the target language but were unable to reproduce the word in its proper orthography. Instead, many attempted unsuccessfully to replicate the sounds phonetically or by guessing the spelling of the word. This suggests that textual analysis encourages a deeper learning than the presentation of audiovisual images.

**Knowledge of Words**

In comparison with the major difference previously outlined, there was only a minimal disparity in the groups’ ability to illustrate their knowledge of the vocabulary; the Non-lab Group (60%) marginally outperformed the Lab Group (54%) in this task. There were significant differences in the approach used by each group to demonstrate knowledge of the words, however, as can be seen from Table 2.

The most noteworthy result is that no subject in either of the groups opted for a definition of the word, irrespective of language. It appears that the definition of a term may have proved to be a more complicated and time-consuming method of illustrating knowledge, in comparison with the other available options.

The provision of an Irish synonym was the most common method of demonstrating knowledge in the Non-lab Group (56%), marginally followed by the provision of an English translation (44%). The opposite was true in the case of those in the Non-lab Group, however, and it was clear that the English translation was by far the most preferred option (82%) as opposed to synonyms in L1 (18%). These results suggest the visual images shown to the Lab Group subjects created an association with the target language and that when prompted by the L2 vocabulary, subjects recalled the visual image and illustrated their knowledge of it through L1. Once again, the lack of consultation with reference material may explain the subjects’ reluctance or possibly their inability to provide a suitable synonym; the easier option was to relate the same concept in the more accessible L1 terminology. The opposite was true for the Non-lab Group, which without any visual aids to make the association relied on the dictionary for an explanation of the terminology and for similar terms; this may explain their inclination towards showing knowledge through L2 synonyms (56%). An L1 translation was used as an alternative when L2 language was not forthcoming, however.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-lab group</th>
<th>Lab group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition (L1 or L2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonym (L1)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation (L2)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total lexical items</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>173</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Methods chosen by Groups A and B to show their knowledge of 20 target language words
**Additional Meaning**

The Lab Group (38%) was over twice as effective as the Non-lab Group (18%) when challenged to illustrate another meaning of each of the lexical items. This low success rate of each group hints that the acquisition and retention of the polysemic knowledge of select technical vocabulary is not a simple process, and that in order to gain an insight into the many meanings and sub-meanings of the vocabulary, an explicit learning approach must be adopted. This approach must go beyond simple strategies of conscious learning and must also incorporate “more in-depth strategies such as semantic mapping and imagery, which are mnemonic techniques related to explicit learning” (Duque, Renié, & Laurier, 1998, p. 5).

**Method 2**

For Method 2, two groups of 10 were selected from the Year 1 cohort; one of which would cover a topic in a traditional classroom setting, and the other in the dynamic multimedia-learning environment. The aim was to cover the same material with both groups and to assess, by means of a separate conversation session immediately afterwards, the level at which both groups of students had engaged with the material and to assess what they had learnt in terms of vocabulary acquired and their ability to draw upon this newly acquired vocabulary in conversation.

The exercise was based on a TG4 news item about urban regeneration in Belfast and highlighted elements such as the economic benefits of creating urban Irish speaking areas, parity of esteem for such areas in terms of governmental, financial support for measures aimed at branding and transforming the physical appearance of the proposed areas in terms of signage etc., and financial assistance for a sustainable program of cultural events to be conducted through the medium of Irish.

This was deemed to be a suitable exercise for the purposes of our comparative study for the following reasons: (i) Neither this topic, nor anything similar to it had been previously covered by the Year 1 cohort; (ii) On the evidence of previous conversation classes it was clear that students would not choose to discuss an issue such as this on their own, even though it could potentially impact on their social and professional lives in the near future.

The materials used with the Non-lab Group were a transcription of the news clip from TG4 news and a set of Vifax exercises comprising: a vocabulary quiz, a set of short answer questions, an antonym quiz and a set of open, discussion type questions aimed at getting the students to deconstruct the issues and arrive at an informed, personal opinion about them. The materials used with the Lab Group were a digitized audiovisual news clip from TG4 news and an electronic copy of the same set of Vifax exercises given to the Non-lab Group. The main difference between the two groups in terms of materials is that the Non-lab Group were given a transcription of the news clip, whereas the Lab Group were given a digital audiovisual copy of the news clip.

The study for both the Lab and the Non-lab Group was divided into two distinct stages: Stage 1 in which the students were exposed to and asked to work with the
material and Stage 2 in which the students were tested on their knowledge of the material and ability to discuss the issues covered.

During Stage 1 with the Non-lab Group the tutor read through the transcription and explained any unfamiliar terminology. The students were then asked to complete the written exercises. Once the students had completed the exercises, the tutor corrected them with the group. During Stage 1 with the Lab Group the students were asked to open the news clip and the exercise document within the media player and to review the clip as minutely as necessary while completing the exercise. Once the students had completed the exercises, the tutor corrected them in conjunction with the group.

Stage 2 took the form of a separate conversation session for both groups during which the students were asked in turn to explain the meaning of a list of 15 key phrases from the news clip and, based on the level of response for each phrase, were probed accordingly by the tutor to encourage them to expand on these key themes—the tutor then opened the debate to the other members of the group to allow for a general expansion on the key themes of the piece. For each key phrase the tutor recorded whether or not the students understood the basic phrase and then the level to which the theme was developed and debated, thereby quantifying group participation.

The results of written exercise, first of all, were used to provide an indication of the effectiveness of both approaches as learning activities.

**General Observations on Non-lab Group**

**Q1:** The students were able to supply most of the vocabulary from the text (avg. mark 89%), and as they had the text before them the spelling was mostly accurate.

**Q2:** The answers supplied mostly followed the wording of the text—indicating copying from the text (avg. mark 78%).

| Table 3. Performance of Non-lab Group in relation to each of the four questions, including mean |
| --------------------------------- | --------------------------------- | --------------------------------- | --------------------------------- | --------------------------------- |
| Student | Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 | Question 4 |
| N       | %          | N       | %          | N       | %          | N       | %          |
| 1       | 10 100     | 4.25 85 | 5 100      | 3.5 70  |
| 2       | 9 90       | 3.5 70 | 5 100      | 3 60   |
| 3       | 10 100     | 4.5 90 | 5 100      | 3 60   |
| 4       | 10 100     | 4.5 90 | 4 80       | 2.75 55 |
| 5       | 7 70       | 3.25 65 | 3 60       | 2.5 50 |
| 6       | 8 80       | 3.75 75 | 5 100      | 2.75 55 |
| 7       | 7 70       | 3 60   | 4 80       | 2.25 45 |
| 8       | 10 100     | 4.5 90 | 5 100      | 3.25 65 |
| 9       | 10 100     | 4.25 85 | 5 100      | 3 60   |
| 10      | 8 80       | 3.5 70 | 2 40       | 3.25 65 |
| Total   | 10 100     | 5 100 | 5 100      | 5 100  |
| Mean    | 8.9 89     | 3.9 78 | 4.3 86     | 2.925 58.5 |
Q3: Most students were able to locate these successfully in the text (avg. mark 86%) but some students left blanks.

Q4: There was little development of the questions posed (avg. mark 58.5%); some students attempted to supply answers directly from the text—this indicates a general failure to identify with the issues raised in the piece, essentially giving the impression that they did not treat the piece as a real report of a current issue—rather as a situation concocted for the purposes of the class. Almost no effort was made to take a side in the main debate featured in the piece.

General Observations on Lab Group

Q1: The students were able to supply most of the vocabulary from context (avg. mark 87%) but spelling tended to be poor; spelling was ignored in the marking.
Q2: There was a general repetition of the vocabulary used in the piece but a much greater tendency to put the answers into their own words (avg. mark 84%).

Q3: Some students successfully attempted all of the questions but on average the responses tended to be a mixture of occasional correct answers supplied from the piece, wrong guesses and unattempted questions (avg. mark 58%) (i.e., students tended not to be well focused on this question).

Q4: There were good responses in most cases, students made a real effort at giving their own opinion rather than relying on what was said in the piece—names and places mentioned in the piece were used frequently—students generally had a good grasp of the main issues and clear notions of there being two parties in the main debate—some students made attempts at trying to lay the responsibility for resolving the problems highlighted in the piece at the door of one or other party (avg. mark 78.5%).

When the group averages are compared we can see that on Question 1 both groups performed equally well (Non-lab avg. 89% vs. Lab avg. 87%); on Question 2 both groups performed quite well with the Lab Group being marginally better (Non-lab avg. 78% vs. Lab avg. 84%); on Question 3 the Non-lab Group performed much better than the Lab Group (Non-lab avg. 86% vs. Lab avg. 58%); and on Question 4 the Lab Group outperformed the Non-lab Group (Non-lab avg. 58.5% vs. Lab avg. 78.5%).

The two conversation sessions were then compared on the following points, using the notes taken by the tutor:

- Ability to provide an accurate definition of the key phrases.
- Ability to expand on the key themes in the immediate context and in a wider context.
- Quality of personal opinions offered during the open debate.
- Confidence in using newly acquired vocabulary and the level of transference of key vocabulary beyond the grammatical category in which it was acquired, i.e., forming adjectives from nouns, active verbal forms from verbal nouns, etc.

It has not been the policy of the Irish subject area to formally stream students according to ability, although we do want to develop this in the future. During the conversation session due allowance was made for the variety of learning levels and learning styles apparent within both groups, i.e., it was expected that both groups would contain students on a scale from those who lack confidence and prefer to let other people take the lead in group discussions, only joining in themselves when prompted; those who let other people speak first, taking more time to form their own opinion before eventually joining in and those who know exactly what they want to say and have the eagerness and confidence to join in the conversation from the start.

Non-lab Group

- The key phrases used here were slightly different from those in Question 1 but most students recognised the words and provided either an explanation in the
target language of the word—with varying degrees of fluency based on their learning level, or failing that a translation of the phrase in L1.

- On the positive side, phrases which included a placename such as Belfast tended to spark the group’s interest but they still needed regular prompting in order to stop them digressing into unrelated areas. Phrases that included a concept such as “the Irish language as a tool for regeneration” elicited a poor response and discussion could not be sustained even with regular prompting.

- For those key phrases that did arouse the group’s interest, the students tended to repeat the views of the main speakers in the piece. Although some of the more competent members of the group did offer their own opinions, these tended to go unchallenged by the lower level learners in the group.

- When prompted students were generally able to recall the newly acquired vocabulary but when discussing the issues some students had forgotten words and had to be reminded of the L2 word.

Lab Group

- As with the Non-lab Group, most students were able to provide a definition in the target language but relied much less on L1 definitions. The students also showed a generally higher level of fluency in their definitions.

- In contrast with the Non-lab Group, the Lab Group showed a much greater willingness to debate the issues and also collaborated more in recalling elements of the material to fuel their group discussions.

- The less advanced students in this group were more eager to contribute to group discussions and even if one of the stronger speakers had just spoken they then made short contributions or gestures to show that they were in agreement with what had been said. The advanced learners in this group were able to recall the opinions of speakers in the news item and go on to give their own views.

- There was some evidence of transference of key vocabulary beyond the grammatical category in which it was acquired.

As a means of post-experiment feedback, focus groups were set up to enable the students to articulate their views and opinions on the exercise. The focus group was held in an informal non-classroom environment and students were encouraged to be honest and open when evaluating both the advantages and disadvantages of the experiment. This proved to be an extremely valuable exercise in terms of constructive criticism and although there were multifarious views on the subject, many comments surfaced repeatedly. The most salient points gleaned from the students’ feedback were:

- In the classes where material was presented audiovisually the students reported generally that this format was new, enjoyable and challenging. In contrast, when asked to comment on presentation of new material the students in the Non-lab
Groups reported generally that, given the timeframe, the expectation to learn so much new vocabulary was excessive and stressful. Students commented that visual images added an immediate context to the story and that as a result they were able to process the information with added clarity and celerity. They felt empowered in that they were able to focus on the words and phrases which they found personally difficult through repeated reviewing and that this was preferable to asking questions of the teacher.

- On the question of support materials available to complete the exercise in Method 1 the students in the Lab Group commented on the fact that there is an inherent lack of electronic on-line lexicographical resources that they could use to check and reference terminology. Referring to hardback copies, they said, was a more laborious procedure which conflicted with the computer-based approach. Many students also complained that contemporary vocabulary, i.e., that used in the news footage could not be found in these dictionaries. This is a valid point insofar as the last major Irish–English dictionary (Focloir–Gaeilge Béarla, ed., Niall Ó Dónaill) was published in 1978 and, as would be expected, many lexicographical advancements have taken place since then.

The central aim of both methods was to expose students to new vocabulary, the evidence provided by the lab and non-lab trials has shown that presenting material audiovisually ensures that the students’ initial contact with new vocabulary is memorable and lasting due to the fact that the new vocabulary is presented in context. They are clear about how a word is pronounced as it is spoken by a native/near-native speaker of the target language and the interactive aspect of the multimedia classes allows students to focus on the words and phrases which are new or unclear to them personally. The non-lab trials highlighted the benefits of close textual analysis in acquisition of lexical items in their written form.

Multimedia teaching labs provide an excellent means of harnessing quality visual media for educational purposes, this is extremely beneficial for a language such as Irish where a resource gap exists, especially at third level. This tentative exploration of teaching methodologies has given us an indication of the benefits we can reasonably expect from both the lab and non-lab setting, and has provided a basis from which we can tailor our language learning aims. Previous studies in this area, such as: Duque et al. (1998), Brown (1993), Chun and Plass (1996), Danan (1992) and Kolich (1991), have shown that a blended approach using both environments is a highly effective method of teaching language, and the results of our research tend to concur with this conclusion. The multimedia lab is clearly a highly suitable environment for students’ initial contact with new vocabulary and for the development of listening skills. Having encountered new vocabulary students need to engage with the language in written form in order to facilitate long term retention and recall. This can be achieved within the traditional classroom setting, as this study has shown, however, the use of multimedia labs may help to expedite this second phase of learning, i.e., through the use of word-processing facilities.
Notes

1. Teaching of Irish at UU is widely regarded as being of the highest calibre and the subject was awarded a maximum 24/24 in the most recent Quality Assurance Agency Subject Review (2001). Available online at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reports/subject-level/q516_01.pdf.

2. A web site based on the items covered in the various shows is available at www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/irish/. For regular listeners this web site acts as a useful counterpart to the radio broadcasts and builds on some of the topics raised therein.

3. Available online at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/.

4. This vocabulary test was developed in loose accordance with the template used by Duque et al. (1998).

References


