

## **Teacher and student roles in multimedia language learning**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses characteristics associated with access and self-directed learning as demonstrated by learners who make use of technology in the language learning process. Focus was specifically on two groups of learners, those following traditional language classes with access to some computer applications and those using such technology exclusively without the guidance of a teacher. Forty-nine questionnaires completed by Irish language learners provided data which led to the findings reported in this article. Data was collected through correspondence with participants, open-ended responses to questionnaire items, and Likert-scale responses. Individuals subscribing to GAEILGE-B, an asynchronous discussion group on the Internet, participated in the project. In terms of self access and technology, participants did not seem as highly motivated about the existing technological tools as one might expect. Either they lacked the training to access the materials or the body of materials was limited as a result of the language being less commonly used. As regards self direction, the data indicates that the quantity and quality of self direction preferred by the participants varied. It appears that this variation is related to their previous Irish language learning experiences.

### **Introduction**

In North America, high school and college language students of the 1960s and 70s relied on teachers and language departments for much of their foreign language exposure. Especially in the case of the oral form, the technology available in the language labs and media centres of many universities far surpassed that of the average home entertainment unit. However, today students who own personal computers with multimedia capacities are often able to access as much target language material at home, in the local public

library, or at work as when on campus (Little 1998: 18). As the Internet opens up opportunities for students to direct their own language learning experiences and to access materials when and where they want to, one must question the roles of the language teacher and student in the twenty-first century classroom.

The present article will limit itself to the learning of Irish as a heritage language.<sup>1</sup> The research reported on below was designed with two questions in mind. First, to what extent do computer assisted language students make use of the current technology to increase their exposure to the target language? And secondly, how much responsibility do computer assisted language students want to have as related to self-directed learning? These two areas of focus, access and self direction, are directly related to the roles of teachers and students in language learning in that traditionally in teacher-fronted classrooms, foreign language teachers controlled student access to language exposure and provided most of the direction in the language learning process.

To assist in analysing the data in the second part of this article, the first part of this article will turn to the more general discussion of the terms 'self access' and 'self directed' as defined by a number of sources. The second part of the article will share the findings of a questionnaire that was administered to one distinct population of Irish language learners. This article will look at the responses that 49 participants volunteered. Three types of data collection were used. First, Likert-scale responses provided data directly related to the research question. Second, multiple choice and open-ended questions (on the same instrument) provided background information. And finally, for some participants, further clarification was provided via e-mail correspondence.

It is recognized from the beginning that the data on which this study and others like it report represent learner beliefs. The data collection process is clearly qualitative though descriptive statistics may be used to analyse results. One of the greatest concerns, of course, would be how truthfully participants responded to the survey questions. Researchers are always aware of the possibility of participants providing responses for which they think the researcher is seeking. This effect was minimized here by prohibiting students of the researcher to take part, and also by having participants complete the surveys on-line.

## Self-access and self-directed learning

Autonomous language learning has been a popular concept in the past decade. Prior to this, learner autonomy was a noted concern in adult education (Little 1991: 6). However, in the early 1990s, research focused increasingly on language learner autonomy as seen in the classrooms and self-access centres of primary, secondary, and university students. More recently, there have been a number of articles that focus on another venue, those who seek to supplement learning on the web, at home, or in a school computer laboratory.

### *Self access*

Self-access learning presents the ideal situation for the computer assisted language learner. Many multimedia software packages permit students to take advantage of conditions that could be described as self-access, working at their own level and getting answers (feedback) immediately (Sheerin 1991). A computer example of self-access would be using software such as the *SpeakWrite* (GalMac Computers Ltd.) package for learning Irish to supplement or teach the language (see Ihde 2001 for product review). Students from beginning to advanced can benefit from such software packages in an interactive manner. Additionally, Internet sites also offer students the opportunity to brush up on an area of grammar of their choice with immediate feedback, or to build their vocabulary at a level of their choice with readings containing a variety of interactive aids (see some of the activities of the 'Irish Gaelic Language Reader' at <http://nexus.brocku.ca/rogawa/gaelic/>).

Self access is an approach to learning that, although not new, has gained popularity at present as a result of a number of factors. The teaching community has developed, among other aspects, a greater sensitivity to learner-centred approaches, an appreciation for autonomous or independent learning, a distrust for a behaviourist view of learning, and an appreciation for the needs of students in designing curriculum (Sheerin 1991). Additionally, greater recognition of individual differences and a realization that certain teacher-fronted activities can be disruptive in the language learning process have occurred (Sheerin 1991).

However, working against self-access are factors related to general access. In the teaching of a less commonly taught language, if the teacher has difficulty gathering materials for each lesson (see

Ihde 2000), it may appear very difficult to provide opportunities for students to use materials on their own (in class, in the language lab, or at home) that address their specific needs and interests. For example, a university lecturer may want to provide extra practice on a specific grammar point. After searching a few available grammar books, she may decide to create her own activity due to a lack of pre-existing activities. This type of situation, where pre-existing supplemental materials are limited, works against creating a student-centred self-access environment.

### *Self-directed learning*

Self-directed learning refers to the ability of the student to act autonomously in his or her language learning process. It must be stressed that a self-directed student is not one that does not need a teacher. Rather, the student is trained by the teacher to use a variety of learning strategies that enable the student to plan, problem-solve, monitor, and evaluate her own learning. As the student can take on more and more responsibility for her own learning, the role of the teacher can slowly change from director to consultant. It is recognized that from time to time the teacher will need to re-establish the role of director, but this will hopefully happen with less frequency as time goes by. What is desired is that the student become increasingly self directed. The great advantage of this, of course, is that when the teacher's support is discontinued (at the end of formal education, for example), the student will continue to take responsibility for his education. And when the student needs help, he will know how to seek out such help.

Obviously students exhibited autonomous language learning behaviour long before computer assisted language learning became a reality. While the computer-assisted learner that we seek to describe here is often forced to take responsibility for her own learning programme, self-directed learning has been well documented throughout the years in the classroom setting. Although many teacher-fronted classroom set-ups have worked against learner autonomy, exceptional classrooms do exist where students are encouraged to exhibit self-directed behaviour (see Holec 1981).

Of course just because students are learning language using computers does not guarantee that they will be permitted to be autonomous in their language learning. Many students are forced to follow a preconceived sequence of lessons. As Gremmo and Riley

(1995: 153) say, 'a grammar drill on a computer is still a grammar drill and if learners are given little choice (or no training, which comes to the same thing) then it is a travesty to call their programmes "self-directed" '. Little (1996: 212) equally reminds the reader against assuming learner autonomy is linked to a particular delivery format especially in reference to recent technological advances: 'learner autonomy is not confined to any particular organisational mode; equally, no organisational mode can in itself guarantee the development of learner autonomy'.

Only when students can voice their needs and take responsibility for their learning can we call such learning self-directed. This of course is in contrast with the pattern of classroom learning throughout the years where students have been taught to listen (silently) first and then act on the knowledge the teacher has passed on to them. However, self-directed learners must be 'pro-active'; they must 'take the initiative' for their learning (Sheerin 1991: 144).

Of course, although the quality of self direction (and self access) is desirable in language learners, it soon becomes obvious that many students cannot develop such a trait on their own. The teaching of information processing skills is directly related to learner autonomy; however, space here does not permit in-depth focus on this aspect of the issue (see Chamot and O'Malley 1990 and Johnson 1995). The characteristics of learning situations that can make computer assisted language learning self-directed include acquiring language while learning how to learn. Students need to develop a repertoire of skills that leads to successful language acquisition. Additionally, they need to recognize that the resources (software) are not the only component needed in computer assisted language learning.

Many of the Irish language respondents reported on here had already recognized this by taking advantage of pen pals (or key pals as they are called on-line), Internet discussion groups, intensive weekends, and local study groups. Of course any of these may not necessarily be examples of self-directed learning. For example, an Internet Irish course that mimics a traditional teacher-centred Irish class would not be self-directed. To be self-directed, the Irish language learner must be advised and learn how to plan his learning process (Holec 1988).

One concern that is often voiced is that regarding the teacher's role vis-à-vis self-directed learning. While this question has been extensively discussed in a number of publications concerning the

teacher in the classroom (see Yang 1998), the role of the teacher or tutor on-line is currently evolving as technology progresses. In either case, Sheerin's comments (1991: 150) hold true: 'Teachers need to become facilitators of learning rather than dispensers of knowledge and learners need to become active agents, taking responsibility for their learning and participating in the decision making which affects their learning'. In the classroom, change from teacher-centred activities to a student-centred approach has not always been successful as a result of a number of factors, and some have cautioned against quick transitions. Yet this is not the case found in the on-line environment. Many language learners taking advantage of on-line offerings have been forced into exhibiting autonomous behaviour because of needs which lead to technology or of technology which opened up possibilities of autonomous learning. Yet, as mentioned above, the skills needed to become an autonomous learner are not automatically acquired. It is hard to assess how many non-traditional language learners using computers have given up in their pursuit to learn a less commonly taught language because they lacked any guidance in developing such skills. Sheerin (1997: 64) emphasizes in this regard that one 'danger of under-advising learners is that this may cause them to feel frustrated, isolated and discouraged so that, in the "worst case scenario", the attempt to learn may be abandoned'.

### **The present survey**

The two research questions that were postulated as the on-line questionnaires were developed were (1) to what extent do computer assisted language students make use of the current technology to increase their exposure to the target language? And (2) how much responsibility do computer assisted language students want to have as related to self-directed learning? Since the questionnaire was directed to computer experienced learners of Irish, the format naturally was on-line.<sup>2</sup> Participants were given the opportunity to choose appropriate answers or to add their own comments. Students were also encouraged to add additional explanations to their Likert-scale responses if necessary. The Internet address for the appropriate questionnaire was announced on an Irish discussion list for elementary level learners of Irish, GAEILGE-B. The questionnaire was located at a specific web address. Participants visited the site,

completed the questionnaire, and then clicked an icon to send in their results. The data discussed below were derived from 49 completed on-line questionnaires that were returned by Irish language learners, subscribers to GAEILGE-B, roughly ten percent of the list's population.

### *Sample profile*

First, let us look at some non-Likert responses that will help us develop a personal profile of those who responded to the survey. When asked where they were learning the target language, the results were quite different. Only two described their course as 'college' level. Twenty-nine picked 'self taught', four picked 'club sponsored course', four picked 'adult school', and two chose 'Internet course'. Eight opted for 'not listed' and explained that they had a mixture of experiences including at least some instructor directed learning. As a result, the sample can be seen as including 20 traditional (to varying degrees) students and 29 non-traditional learners. They are referred to as TILL and NTILL below. The entire Irish language sample is referred to as ILL.

While the survey used the word 'self-taught' as a descriptor, this word will not be used in the reporting of the research findings. Rather the adjective 'non-traditional' is used here to indicate that the students were neither physically nor virtually in a classroom with teacher guidance. However, in the case of the non-traditional subgroup, it is clear that as members of a discussion list, these on-line language learners had many informal peer tutors, though no formal teacher-student relationship existed. This description is in line with comments by Dam (1990) and Little (1990, 1991) that remind us that autonomous language learners do not imply teacher-less learners. Rather, autonomous learners seek out others who can counsel them or even work co-operatively with them in the language learning process. This individual can be a teacher, but he or she can also be a peer or a more advanced student.

One must be aware that 'non-traditional language learner' as used in this article and the term 'distance language learner' are not synonymous. The 'non-traditional language learner,' unlike the distance language learner, is not following a course or curriculum and has no formally identified teacher or tutor. He or she is sampling and experiencing language lessons and authentic texts from books, audiotapes, CDs, and on-line web sites with minimal direction

provided by fellow discussion list subscribers. White (1999) refers to 'self-instructed' distance learners. The learners White seeks to describe have greater direction provided by teacher or programme in that they 'receive a package of materials ... which constitute, in content, the equivalent of the classroom-based programme' (p. 444). The amount of direction the non-traditional Irish language learners in this article received is considerably less and unorganized.

In that the non-traditional participants were members of the GAEILGE-B discussion list, they were receiving several messages a day either in Irish or messages in English about a certain aspect of the Irish language. Such messages were posted by fellow students or tutors/teachers and can be read on-line at the GAEILGE-B archives. The non-traditional Irish language students reported having several 'teach-yourself' books and cassettes. The most commonly cited software package was *Learn Irish Now*. Additionally they cited access to the following software: *Liberation Philology*, *Fios Feasa Proverbs*, *Talk Now*, the Bible in Irish, *31 Languages of the World*, and *Now You're Talking Multimedia Flashcards*.

Returning to the general profile of the sample, 38 respondents appeared to be residing in the United States. The remaining 11 were identified with Canada (2), Australia (2), Ireland (2), Sweden (2), Brazil (1), Bulgaria (1), and Israel (1). The questionnaires stated that native speakers and those who studied Irish in primary and secondary schools in Ireland were disqualified from participating.

The Likert-scale questions solicited a response from 1 to 6. The following numbers were identified with the following descriptors:

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Disagree somewhat
- 4 – Agree somewhat
- 5 – Agree
- 6 – Strongly agree.

### *Language learning*

Before looking at the responses to prompts regarding self access and self-directed learning, it might be helpful to see some of the respondents' general attitudes regarding learning Irish. The term 'sense of self-efficacy' is useful here for identifying a common trait in these responses. Schunk (1985: 208) identifies self efficacy as

being 'personal judgements of performance capabilities in a given domain of activities'.

The students showed some agreement with the statement 'I am a good Irish language learner'. They agreed somewhat on average. The average for this statement was 4.04 (sd = 1.27, n = 48), and little difference was noted in the subgroup findings (TILL M = 4.00, sd = 1.21; NTILL M = 4.07, sd = 1.33, n = 28).<sup>3</sup>

However, the statement 'I do not think I will ever speak Irish fluently' drew slightly different responses. This item on the average showed a weak sense of disagreement, yet with extremely high levels of variation in student responses (total M = 3.15, sd = 1.73, n = 48). Once again, only a small difference between the subgroup means was observed (TILL M = 2.95, sd = 1.67; NTILL M = 3.29, sd = 1.78, n = 28).

Although students in the sample were not completely united regarding a self-evaluation of their ultimate attainment, a positive mean was noted for each subgroup regarding their opinion of language learning. Irish language learners responded very strongly to the statement 'I like learning the Irish language' with the average 5.61 (sd = 0.57). Both Irish subgroups showed equally strong findings (TILL M = 5.50, sd = 0.61; NTILL M = 5.69, sd = 0.54).

In general, regarding attitudes of language learning, the members of the sample did not seem to rate themselves highly on ability; however, they seemed to enjoy the act of learning the language. Both subsets were in agreement on these points.

Lastly, before viewing data for the research questions, it is of interest to note that Irish language respondents on the average (M = 5.00, n = 45) agreed that conversation opportunities are a very important part of their language learning experience. However there was considerable variation in this finding (sd = 1.40). There was only a small difference between the means reported for the traditional subgroup (TILL M = 5.15, sd = 0.99) and the non-traditional subgroup (NTILL M = 4.88, sd = 1.67, n = 25). However, the amount of variation in responses appeared higher among those who had not studied in a traditional classroom environment.

### *Technology and access*

Now let us focus on the research questions. There were several Likert-scale questions that can give us an insight into students' opinions of technology and access. While the prompts do not directly

address self-access learning, many questions related to self access can be raised now as a result of the general access data below. Five access prompts and the resulting data are listed. First, 'If there were no computers and no Internet, I would not study the Irish language' brought in 'disagree' on the average for the group. However, the teacher-taught Irish subgroup ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $sd = 1.27$ ) reported 'strongly disagree' to 'disagree' on average. The non-traditional Irish language subgroup was weaker in their disagreement reporting 'disagree' to 'weakly disagree' on average ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $sd = 1.83$ ,  $n = 27$ ; ILL  $M = 2.09$ ,  $sd = 1.61$ ,  $n = 47$ ).

For the statement 'The Internet (web pages and/or e-mail) has helped me in my Irish language learning process', the sample recorded a mean of 3.90 ( $sd = 1.71$ ,  $n = 38$ ). Surprisingly, the non-traditional Irish language subgroup recorded a lower mean ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $sd = 2.01$ ,  $n = 19$ ) than the traditional Irish language subgroup ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $sd = 1.32$ ,  $n = 19$ ). What is most interesting about this question are the high percentages of people who did not answer this item.

Little difference between subgroups was seen in the comment 'I am a better Irish language learner now that I have access to a computer'. The non-traditional Irish language subgroup agreed ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $sd = 1.38$ ,  $n = 26$ ) as did the teacher-taught Irish subgroup, though not as strongly (TILL  $M = 4.44$ ,  $sd = 1.04$ ,  $n = 18$ ; Irish sample as a whole:  $M = 4.73$ ,  $sd = 1.26$ ,  $n = 44$ ).

Related to the advantages of student-centred access and technology, the comment 'Using a computer to supplement my Irish language learning is extremely convenient because I have a very busy schedule' was agreed to on average by the sample (total sample  $M = 4.69$ ,  $sd = 1.52$ ,  $n = 42$ ; TILL  $M = 4.72$ ,  $sd = 1.41$ ,  $n = 18$ ; NTILL  $M = 4.67$ ,  $sd = 1.66$ ,  $n = 24$ ).

The last statement to which I'd like to refer is 'I would prefer taking an Irish language on-line course to attending class in person provided the web based course included sound files and individualised feedback via e-mail from a teacher'. On the average, the Irish sample somewhat disagreed with this statement (ILL  $M = 3.14$ ,  $sd = 1.72$ ). There was some difference between the Irish subgroups on this statement (TILL  $M = 2.70$ ,  $sd = 1.56$  and NTILL  $M = 3.45$ ,  $sd = 1.78$ ). It should also be noted that 100% of the sample responded to this question.

*Self-directed learning and technology*

Regarding self-directed learning and technology, there were a number of statements that can give one insight into students' opinions. For example, a positive response to the statement 'I like to study independently without the teacher telling me what to do every minute' might suggest that students prefer to be more independent in language learning. The mean for this question among the Irish language participants was 3.57 (sd = 1.31, n = 47), at midpoint between agreeing and disagreeing on average. The Irish subgroups showed a slight difference in responses with traditionally-taught participants being slightly more united in their response (TILL M = 3.80, sd = 0.95; NTILL M = 3.41, SD = 1.53, n = 27).

To the statement 'Even if the teacher is bad, I can learn something' the response on average was 4.16 (sd = 1.16, n = 19) from the teacher-taught Irish students. The average response from those who had not had the experience of learning Irish from a teacher was weaker (M = 3.54, sd = 1.50, n = 26). The Irish sample as a whole responded with a mean of 3.80 and considerable variation (sd = 1.36, n = 45).

However, to the statement 'I like to study at my own pace and make my own schedule for studying', the sample as a whole recorded a 4.50 (sd = 1.24, n = 48), an average between weak to middle agreement. There was no difference in the means for the subgroups (TILL M = 4.50, sd = 1.10; NTILL M = 4.50, sd = 1.35, n = 28).

For the statement 'If I cannot understand a grammar or vocabulary comment about the Irish language in an e-mail message, I feel comfortable asking for clarification', the mean for the entire Irish sample was 4.53 (sd=1.37, n=47) with little difference between the subgroups (TILL M=4.42, sd=1.12, n=19; NTILL M=4.61, sd=1.52, n=28).<sup>4</sup>

**Discussion and conclusions**

The purpose of this project was to collect opinions of technologically-mediated access and self-directed learning of language learning students. At a time when the roles of teachers and students are drastically changing, there is value in recording what students think and feel the task of their teacher and that of themselves should

be. Although the findings here share similarities with those of other projects concerning autonomy and the teacher's role (see for example Cotterall 1999), one should keep in mind that technology here was as an additional factor.

Before returning to the research questions, some general observations of the data can be made. In many cases, answers to why students responded to questions as they did could be related to their motivation. As would be expected, both those students studying a second language (with an immediate application) and those studying a heritage language (such as Irish) may appear more highly motivated than those studying a foreign language (with in some cases no immediate or future application).<sup>5</sup> This issue is raised in the data with the question regarding ultimate proficiency attainment. While the Irish language sample as a whole reported similar levels of self-evaluation on being a 'good' language learner and similar levels of enjoyment regarding the learning of a language, the level of fluency they expected to attain was higher than the level one might expect of the average foreign language learner in the United States.

Now let us turn to the findings for the first research question regarding technology and access; the findings speak especially of the role of computers in making desired material available to students. Students agreed that they would not abandon their language studies in the absence of computers. However, the group weakly agreed that access to the computer has improved their language learning process.

As regards the use of Internet web pages, students did not appear strongly excited about their application to language learning. Surprisingly the Irish non-traditional group that relied heavily on the Internet neither agreed nor disagreed on average as to the utility of web pages. This may be due in part to the small number of such pages that existed two years ago in this less commonly taught language.<sup>6</sup> It could be claimed that in the case of teacher-taught students, the exposure and utility of the Internet rely heavily on the recommendations of their teachers. Students of teachers who are not familiar with the medium might be expected on average to report less exposure. The way computers are used in some language programmes brings to mind Benson's (1997) description of the process of deradicalization. He explains that institutional choices have reduced the ability of Internet-enabled computers to revolutionize language teaching. Such reduction is widespread.

Regarding the following of structured on-line language courses, the Irish non-traditional group registered an average mean between the 'somewhat disagree' and 'somewhat agree' range. The other subgroup was in the 'disagree' area on the average. Since many of the non-traditional Irish language students had no access to in-person classes, this option, that of an on-line course, perhaps may have been perceived by some as the only solution, though not a very palatable one.

To respond to the research question, students on average do not indicate that they view technology as a solution to increasing access choices. For instance, some participants do not seem ready to take on the responsibility of a technologically-advanced language learning environment, and in other cases as a result of a dearth of less commonly taught language materials, an environment with self-access opportunities through the Internet is difficult to maintain. Until a greater number of interactive software and on-line offerings exists, one will be forced to talk about 'access' in the most basic sense as opposed to a self-access language learning environment.

Now let us consider the second research question, 'How much responsibility do computer assisted language students want to have as related to self-directed learning?'. The Irish sample as a whole took a middle-of-the-road stance, neither agreeing nor disagreeing strongly as relates to needs for greater freedom in the language learning process. While there was great variation in the finding from data collected for the question that read, 'In general, I like to study independently without somebody telling me what to do every minute', a similar finding was recorded for 'I like to study at my own pace and make my own schedule for studying' with less variation. The Irish sample as a whole agreed weakly on average.

One possible explanation for these results may be that unlike foreign language learners who may not have a heritage link to the language they are learning, most Irish language learners do not feel that they are being forced to learn the language, regardless if the class is held in person or virtually. However, heritage students may feel that they have been forced to self direct. Often adult Irish language students begin studying the language on their own before finding a teacher. These students who have experienced greater freedom may look forward to greater guidance in how to direct their learning once they are lucky enough to find a teacher. This is especially the case of less commonly taught languages where many students never find a teacher holding classes in the language of their

choice within a 90-minute car drive. For some students who have unsuccessfully tried learning Irish 'on their own', they may want the newly-found teacher to assume total responsibility for the direction of their studies (see Ihde 1995 regarding desire for teacher direction in written feedback).

### **Direction of future research**

While this paper made extensive reference to descriptive statistics, it must be kept in mind that this project is a qualitative research project. There was no attempt to have random selection of participants to insure that representative sections of the given populations were sampled nor was there an attempt to mask the participants' identity as one could find in many other projects (see Stevens 1996 for example). However, the Irish language learner sample was broadly based in that about 10% of an international discussion list's subscribers participated in a self-evaluation.

I would suggest that future work in this area continue to build on the qualitative structure of this project as opposed to changing to a quantitative model. In North America, while more commonly-taught languages such as ESL, French, German, and Spanish could provide large populations to be sampled, less commonly-taught languages such as Irish could not. However, in trying to set up a similar project with ESL and Spanish samples, the researcher found it difficult to obtain a large 'non-traditional' subgroup. Two observations can be made of this situation. First, LCTL (less commonly taught language) students seem to be more apt to be 'self-taught' than MCTL (more commonly taught language) students.<sup>7</sup> While the researcher did contact several discussion lists for English language learners (BUSINESS-SL, CHAT-SL, and SPORTS-SL), the lists were not designed for non-traditional learners, but rather teacher-taught students supplementing class exercises. No lists for 'self-taught' learners were identified after repeated searches of the web. It may be due to the nature of more commonly taught languages that large groups of 'self-taught' students are difficult to locate. In the Irish example, about 10% of the GAEILGE-B discussion list participated in the survey and more than half reported that they had not taken classes with a teacher.

Second, it appears that LCTL students might be more likely to participate in such surveys than MCTL students as a result of

isolation. LCTL students, whether studying with or without a traditional teacher, appear to want to share their story of learning an 'exotic' language. In the case of learning a less-prestigious language such as Irish or Haitian Creole, the learner may be honoured to have someone ask them serious questions about their learning process with a minority language. Invitations for participation on three English language learning lists provided only one participant, whereas the one Irish language learning discussion list provided 49.

With the above in mind, it is recommended that research such as this be extended to other less commonly taught languages. One of the problems with collecting data from LCTL learners is that populations are often small, as stated above, and the ability to carry out multiple surveys of the same population may exhaust the patience of the participants. For this reason it is suggested here that this research now be extended to other LCTLs.

Though all of the LCTL students questioned here had access to the Internet, further research needs to look at what factors continue to inhibit some non-traditional language learners from having access to computers. Interactive LCTL software is only in its early stages of development. Programmes such as *SpeakWrite* for Irish have not always been widely available in all computer formats. Supplemental LCTL materials on computer such as dictionaries are beginning to appear; however, easily accessible software to check grammar in Irish when word processing, for example, is still needed. On-line courses are available from time to time in Irish, but have yet to make a strong presence on the web.

Lastly, longitudinal research needs to be carried out on the needs and goals of the on-line learner. Are the materials presently available that encourage self directedness and self access really aiding students in their goal to become fluent language users? Or is much of the colour and art of current software packages really distracting students from achieving their goal? As a result of the quickly changing technological landscape, it is often fruitless for research to focus on one computer application since that particular application may be completely outdated by the time the research project is completed. It is for this reason that this project focused on more general themes such as access and self direction, themes that will continue to be important to language learners regardless of what type of computer application is currently the rage.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many students who volunteered their time to complete the on-line questionnaires. Parts of the questionnaire were adapted from a previous project that Carol Miele, Ruru Rusman, and I carried out at Bergen Community College with ESL students and reported on at the spring NJTESOL/NJBE conference in 1997. I would like to thank fellow Celticists and the Institutional Research Board at William Paterson University who provided feedback on the initial draft of the survey. Ming Jian and Brian Fanning of William Paterson University also need to be acknowledged for their assistance with software and programming needs. Lastly, thanks need to be given to those who attended my presentation of these data at the North American Association for Celtic Language Teachers 1999 conference at the University of Ottawa. I found their questions and suggestions extremely helpful.

### Notes

1. Irish was being learned as a foreign language by the participants. However, most of them were of Irish heritage. Forty-two indicated that they were learning Irish because of their Irish heritage and two additional participants indicated Scottish heritage, a closely related culture in terms of native language and history. Only five of the 49 participants did not indicate a heritage link. This heritage factor could explain some of the noted elevated levels of motivation in questions especially concerning pleasure derived from learning the language.
2. In the early weeks of the research, a few respondents claimed that they could not fill out the questionnaire on-line. They were permitted to fill in the questionnaire using paper and pencil. While the data from these questionnaires were instructive, these data are not reported here. It was decided that the data collection methods were too different to permit inclusion.
3. Number of responses are given only if one or more participants in that group did not respond.
4. The GAELIGE-B discussion messages are distributed through e-mail.
5. The term foreign language (as well as second language and heritage language) is used in a North American context. Obviously there are some

exceptional foreign language programmes in North American high schools and colleges. Likewise, English as a foreign language (EFL) is studied with high motivation in many regions of the world (see for example Yang 1999). However, in many parts of the United States, foreign language learners appear to lack motivation for a variety of reasons.

6. There have been several additional Irish language resources added to the web since 1999 (the time of the survey) including <http://www.beo.ie>, for example.

7. 'Self-taught' is being used in the sense of one who, for example, learns a language using a 'teach-yourself' text. As mentioned above, the researcher realizes that these on-line non-traditional learners are not really self-taught in that their peers and more advanced students provide them with advice and direction. This situation is not unlike that described by Shield and Weininger (1999) regarding relationships between less experienced and more experienced Schmooze University frequenters.

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