

Multi-Disciplinary Language Education with ICT for Vocational Training

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Abstract

The Irish language is the first language of the Irish state. On 01 January 2007, Irish became a full EU official language, with a temporary derogation which has been further extended for a period of five years until 31 December 2016.

The delivery of Irish language training for lawyers changed in 2008 requiring a multi-disciplinary course design and delivery approach. There were disparate criteria to be satisfied: the legal status of the language, vocationally relevant learning outcomes, robust linguistic integrity, pre-existing solicitor training programme timetable restrictions, students of varying abilities and satisfactory monitoring and quality control for annual reporting to Government.

The Legal Practice Irish Courses subsequently designed and delivered in the Law Society of Ireland Education Department used 'blended learning' that embraced ICT, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Problem Based Learning (PBL), embedded in an open source Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle. An elementary course, Legal Practice Irish (LPI) addressed the following trainee solicitors' competencies: to meet and greet a client who wished to do legal business through Irish, to use Irish legal terminology in that interaction and to refer that client to a solicitor who practices law through Irish. The innovative approach, design, and teaching and learning methodologies of this course formed part of a national research project, co-ordinated by University College Cork (UCC).[5] In early 2010 the first Advanced Legal Practice Irish (ALPI) course, built on the elementary structure using a framework of lawyer skills and incorporating CEFR and CPD criteria. Linguistic expertise was added to the in-house team later that year, allowing for communication with faculty through Irish and dispensing with the need for outsourcing translation work

In 2012 the Legal Practice Irish Courses won the European Language Label (ELL). The Jury commented as follows: "The project addresses the needs of learners at various levels so as to equip them with the skills to deal with their clients through Irish – some at a very basic level and others at a much higher level (e.g. native speakers)...A wide range of resources is used for blended learning...Highly motivational for learners and teachers as course materials are adapted to suit needs...Very creative use of technology and materials for all different abilities, from students new to the language to native speakers...This project is adaptable to all languages in which legal services are provided and is particularly suitable to less used languages."

Both courses have benefited from continuous improvement since achieving the ELL, which, as reported to NELLIP has been invaluable in supporting this work. There is room for further enhancement development and transnational collaborations to include in particular, greater accessibility from an ICT perspective, for those with disabilities.

1. The Irish Language

1.1 Origins

The Irish Language (*An Ghaeilge*) is a member of the Goidelic (Gaelic) branch of Celtic languages which include Scottish, Gaelic, Manx. It has produced the oldest written literature north of the Alps [1] and has an unbroken literary tradition of over fourteen centuries as evidenced by its acknowledged contribution in *Patrimoine littéraire européen* [2] The earliest version of Irish, referred to in the literature as 'Primitive Irish' was 'ogham', a system of writing that involves inscribing vertical and slanted lines on wood or stone, used mainly on territorial markers and gravestones. With the arrival of Christianity in the latter half of the first millennium, Primitive Irish evolved from a predominantly oral culture into Old Irish, adopting the Latin alphabet for its written form. The evolution from Old Irish to Middle Irish was heralded by the arrival the Norse language of the Vikings. The Anglo-Normans had the greatest impact on the primary spoken language of Ireland, as it evolved into Modern Irish circa 1600 and also began to decline into the 20th century. [3]



1.2 Decline and Revival of Irish

Irish remained the language of the majority until the mid-19th century but declined as a vernacular language from the 17th century onwards. British colonisation outlawed the use of Irish making the English language dominant in parliament, the courts and the workforce. This decline was accelerated by the death of 1-2 million Irish language speakers in the Great Famine from 1845 [4] and by subsequent mass emigration [5].

After many years of upheaval resulting in Irish Independence from the British Empire, in 1937 Article 8 of the Irish Constitution designated Irish as the first language of the Irish state. In recent times, politically motivated efforts through legislation [6] and the role assumed by Foras na Gaeilge [7] since Ireland's Belfast Agreement have served to revive and promote the language. Arguably, the designation of Irish as a 'treaty language' on joining the EU in 1973 and as an 'official and working' language in 2007 [8] has had the most profound influence on revival and interest in Irish in current times. Currently Irish in the EU is focused on regulations for co-decision of the Council and Parliament with renewable five year derogation periods in place with respect to implementing pervasive translation and interpretation functionality across all EU institutions. The current derogation is in place until 31 December 2016 [9]. A national terminology database, www.focal.ie has been developed with support from the EU which greatly supports the necessary standardisation of that functionality. As a consequence of national and EU policies there has been an enormous increase in available university courses in translation and interpretation of Irish. In 2008 Government policy focused the providers of vocational training for lawyers which is the focus of this paper [10].

1.3 Language and Culture

The Irish language has remained a key identifier for cultural nationalism and a symbol of our 'Irishness', despite its current minority status. A Government statement in 2006 declared "...the Irish language is of particular importance for the people, society and culture of Ireland. As a spoken community language, Irish is unique to this country and is, therefore, of crucial importance to the identity of the Irish people and to world heritage" [11]. In *Gaeltacht* areas Irish is used as the primary daily language of its inhabitants. A census in 2011 showed that 1.77 million could speak the language; approximately 70,000 spoke it daily, with 23,000 of those situated in *Gaeltacht* regions [12]. In recent years there has been a rise in the provision of education through the medium of Irish at all levels from pre-school upwards, positively impacting language preservation [13]. Irish is also present in the media, with an all-Irish television station and several radio stations and newspapers. The language is an important feature of its speakers' identities [14] as recognized in government pursuit of a policy of bilingualism.

2. Vocational Legal Education

2.1 Legislation and Training Structure

The Irish Legal Profession has inherited the British dualist model of solicitor and barrister. Ireland lost its native connection to the Celtic Brehon Law which had been written down since the 7th century surviving until the 17th century [15]. The training of Irish solicitors by The Law Society of Ireland (The Society) is regulated by the Solicitors Act of 1954 and is delivered as the Professional Practice Course (PPC) in its Education Department.

The Legal Practitioners (Irish Language) Act 2008 (The 2008 Act) [16] amended the rules for training lawyers in the Irish language, in compliance with the designation of Irish as the first language of the state [17]. In providing for enhanced Constitutional and cultural rights in the provision of legal services in Irish, this legislation therefore placed a statutory obligation on The Society to create new courses.

2.2 Course Design challenges and process

There were many challenges confronting the course manager and co-author of this paper in meeting the prescriptive nature of the 2008 Act. It was necessary to create an elementary course for all trainee solicitors engaging in the first stage of their vocational training (PPCI) and then an advanced course at PPCII level for those who determined that they wanted to practice law through the medium of Irish. The respective courses were entitled Legal Practice Irish (LPI) and Advanced Legal Practice Irish (ALPI). In creating LPI the first practical challenge was a timetabling one. The second challenge was that the Course Manager's interaction and skills in the Irish language were from pre-college days. There was an obvious necessity for a multi-disciplinary approach which drew together teaching and learning course design skills in legal training using ICT, support from IT colleagues and the involvement of linguists with experience in delivering language programmes. For ALPI, a higher level of expertise was required to include lawyers with Legal Irish linguistic skills and experienced linguists to focus on grammar and translation.



2.3 The Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration

The course designer was aware of the policy in place for training solicitors. She drew on her experience as a legal practitioner and also from recent qualifications in the integration of ICT in Education. Interested linguists were identified. Research identified best practice in teaching languages. The IT Department agreed to scaffold the course design to deliver those elements of language learning that facilitated the student to 'see' the language tasks on-line, 'hear' correct pronunciation, 'access' vocabulary and to learn how to 'speak' using appropriate legal terminology in Irish. A Moodle VLE had been recently installed for other courses, so the challenge was to explore what Moodle could deliver to meet the course design aspirations.

2.4 The Design Outcomes

The legal platform comprised course materials across general practice disciplines and integrated different areas of legal practice that would ordinarily merge in a real world environment. The materials manifested as Problem Based Learning (PBL) Scenarios of initial solicitor/client consultations.

At LPI level, weekly quizzes and questionnaires explored key legal terminology of each of the selected areas of law. The www.focal.ie website referred to at paragraph 1.2 was an invaluable resource for general and Legal Irish terminology. Some on-line 'background information' was compiled to support necessary legal research to answer the issues raised in the quizzes and questionnaires. All of these resources were then translated by an Irish language consultant.

Having 'seen' the material on-line trainees could then 'listen' to podcasts in a fit for purpose language laboratory, where they paired up to role-play the solicitor-client roll to record their own version of the weekly interaction with the virtual 'client'. These role-plays addressed the solicitors' competencies specified in the 2008 Act.

In early 2010 the first ALPI course, built on the elementary structure using a framework of lawyer skills and incorporating CEFR and CPD criteria. Linguistic expertise was added to the in-house team later that year, when the co-author of this paper joined the team, allowing for communication with faculty through Irish and dispensing with the need for outsourcing translation work. At ALPI level all legal skills were experienced by participants in a case study framework, through the medium of Irish and grammar tasks were paramount. The administrative aspects of the Moodle VLE including the use of scorm files tracked trainee engagement with course task submission which scaffolded course attendance requirements. On-line discussion between class participants through SpeakApps [18] facilitated on-line 'workshops'.

The innovative approach, design, and teaching and learning methodologies of this course formed part of a national research project, co-ordinated by University College Cork where the reader can obtain further information on the integrative teaching and learning which occurred and the ICT tools employed. [19]

3. The European Language Label (ELL)

Projects that received the ELL been assessed by experts representing the European Commission as quality language projects in Europe The Legal Practice Irish Courses (LPI and ALPI) won the 2012 ELL. The criteria for the assessment was three-fold: Languages for Employability and Competitiveness, Language Learning using New Technologies and The Multilingual Classroom

In 2012 the Legal Practice Irish Courses won the European Language Label (ELL). The ELL Jury commented as follows: *"The project addresses the needs of learners at various levels so as to equip them with the skills to deal with their clients through Irish – some at a very basic level and others at a much higher level (e.g. native speakers)...A wide range of resources is used for blended learning...Highly motivational for learners and teachers as course materials are adapted to suit needs...Very creative use of technology and materials for all different abilities, from students new to the language to native speakers...This project is adaptable to all languages in which legal services are provided and is particularly suitable to less used languages."* The courses continue to be evaluated and improved based on research and faculty and trainee evaluation feedback since achieving the ELL, which, as reported to NELLIP, has been an invaluable support to this work as an independent, rigorous and high level independent quality assessment. Future development, with transnational collaborations is welcomed with a particular interest in incorporating greater ICT accessibility for those with disabilities.

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