

Subject Area

Teacher training for second-level schools; methodologies used in Second-Language teaching (Irish) and in teaching through the medium of a second-language (Irish)

Choice of tools and brief description

1. Blackboard

Blackboard(.com) is a courseware tool which allows the development of the following features: lecture notes and ancillary material, weblinks to external sources, discussion forums, student-instructor communication. It is designed to support classroom-based or distance education. A certain amount of features and webspace may be freely used on an individual or 'try-out' basis, but there is a license fee for extended usage or institutional site customization.

2. Hot Potatoes

Hot Potatoes and other products produced by the University of Victoria/Half-baked Software are software tools developed by their TESL department. They take several tried, tested and 'best practice' second-language teaching techniques in reading and writing development and adapt them into a pre-programmable interactive learning program which has the capability to go deeper than 'drill-and-practice'. They also may be programmed to provide the basic interface in any language supported by the standard ANSI table, and at any level that the instructor wishes. As such they provide a powerful range of possibilities. All that the instructor needs is the time to plan and execute the necessary input.

They are constantly developing new programs, some free for academic use, others available as shareware (but still free to download as a 'limited' version, with less features than the paid version). These programs are getting larger and more complex and promise more to come. They also have the advantage of needing little prior computing knowledge, so the messenger doesn't get in the way of the message.

Why choose these tools?

I chose these tools to improve my own work output, both in quality and efficiency, for next year. I work with student teachers, most of them with little teaching experience. Their first encounter with me tends to be in October, while they have already been in the classroom since September. The provision of guidance and resources through the medium of Blackboard or a similar tool would help them in these initial stages. They could refer to pedagogical sources quoted in the course and e-mail me about specific problems.

Once term had started in college, the Blackboard site could be extended to provide more information with reference to my (occasional) lectures. As these lectures are seldom, I do not get a chance to cover everything I think they need. Blackboard would facilitate provision of ancillary material.

Communication works two ways. As I spend the bulk of my time visiting them in their schools, encouraging the use of e-mail through Blackboard rather than phone messages means that they can no longer claim to have tried to phone me and I wasn't in and they were too shy to leave a message on voicemail.

It would also provide links to prepared materials from Hot Potatoes (HP). Going through this material, some based at remedial level, some based at native speaker level, they could see the diversity available within the same basic techniques. Whether or not they would go on to use HP in the classroom, the aim in this context is to reinforce their teaching behaviours through the fostering of good practice.

I am also interested in nurturing a culture of collaboration in the dissemination of material at this entry level of teaching, as a possible way of combating the lack of materials available to teachers of Irish or through Irish at second level.

Blackboard

Blackboard is a communication tool.

What goes into the Blackboard infrastructure is the most time-consuming and important part of the process, not the how. It is quite straightforward to use, and provides a valuable service platform. It is concerned with access, however, not delivery of education. The quality of delivery lies in the mind of the instructor using the infrastructure.

Reflective teaching

The act of putting together HP exercises invites reflection, I have discovered. What subject shall the facilitator/instructor/teacher/author use? What topic? Which level? What do I want to elicit from the student? How do I say in an encouraging manner and at an appropriate level that they are wrong? Are my phrases on the interface set appropriately from a linguistic point of view? Each decision must reflect the needs of the student and the intent of the author.

All these questions go through the user of HP as an author. These are the questions that the student language teacher needs to ask. The bonus is that they forget to even notice that they are using target-language-based techniques and hopefully will absorb these through an intellectual 'osmosis'.

Collaborative learning

HP is a big project. It could thus be broken down and groups established to make up sample tasks either by exercise style (e.g. JBC or JCLOZE or JCROSS etc.) or by language topic or by language level or by language subject in the case of teaching through L2. The resultant exercises would be accessed by all the contributors, thus showing the value of groupwork and sharing in a concrete manner.

This is an important lesson for the future, as teaching resources for remedial Irish and Irish-medium education are mainly 'home-made' anyway, due the paucity of available published work (books or web or computer-based). Encouraging the culture of collaboration and sharing will lessen the work burden of these future teachers.

HP-authoring skills

HP provides delivery, which complements Blackboard's access role. I will further discuss this in the main essay, but it encourages teachers to problem-solve within the authoring process, and it includes the all-important 'fun' element while so doing.

It also provides a way to attend to the needs of minority groups within the larger class e.g. a small honours group within a pass cohort, or a remedial needs group within a pass/honours cohort.

It quickly becomes obvious in the exercise- authoring process that several skills are needed. It reinforces the need for planning both in the execution of translating the interface to the target language and also in the construction of the tools themselves.

Whether working as a group or alone, organisational/librarian skills have to be developed in order to classify and label exercises, both for use and to allow future expansion. Without a frame of reference, time and energy would be wasted in duplication of resources or in searching for existing exercises for re-use.

Content

Blackboard: Course code: TG1

Student webpage: <http://www.student.dcu.ie/%7Enileanr2/index.html> (nileanr2)

Floppy disk with material to be mounted on website

I have learnt myself that a tool like Blackboard, which needs very little prior computing skills, can be easily accessed and developed. TG1 on blackboard is still a work in progress. I got sidetracked by HP after only entering a very little on it. What I intend to do is to use it as a resource hub for my own students.

I will:

- summarise lectures and workshops on it,
- include a reading list of language pedagogy texts,
- include how to produce a síniú fada (several ways, depending on the software running. This document uses ALTGr+vowel, for instance, where HP uses Alt+3lettercode
- link it to a list of online computer tutorials for self-learning,
- include unzipping download sites and instructions as to their use, in case they wish to download HP
- list Irish language websites of interest,
- provide e-mail access to me,
- Link it to the HP homesite and also to my own examples of HP in Irish

I have learnt that planning is paramount, both to order the scope of the course and the content, as well as deciding on feedback needed or wanted.

With HP, I practiced the following new skill: unzipping a zipped download

I have accessed the configuration files for most of the HP programs to date, and translated them with student teachers or other good-to-fluent user levels in mind. I have made up a few sample exercises, some with adults in mind, some with basic skills schoolchildren in mind. I 'pottered around' and got the feel of the concept, always with the aim of disseminating this process to student teachers.

I also intend to ftp these exercises to my DCU website, for reference in the coming year and to use in conjunction with TG1

Process

In the time I spent 'pottering around' with HP, the main thought that came to mind is that planning again is paramount.

What is to be entered onto the interface and what subject matter will that interface manipulate? As mentioned above, for the student teacher as user it provides reflection on various aspects of language teaching methodology. The measurement of the effectiveness using this technology could be approached in several ways.

- Tracking of student access to materials on the Blackboard site.
- Counting 'hits' on the website where webpages are mounted. (This could necessitate passwording the site, which I am loath to do at this stage, being an aging femmie commie hippy green liberal).
- Mounting questionnaires on Blackboard re student reflections of HP for e-mail back to me.
- Are these techniques displayed on HP reflected in their classroom teaching as evidenced by their teaching practice portfolio? Assuming that very little computer access is afforded to them because they are Irish teachers, not I.T. teachers, this will be reflected in lesson plans and materials, and be seen in my visits.
- Do any of the students download the HP material themselves?
- I also assume that I could influence the main methods lecturer to include a HP assignment on the course. We would be in agreement that the language level of the interface is critical, as is the actual content of the exercise, as is written evidence of reflection and planning before approaching the computer.

Concluding note

Blackboard is in English only, and the section headings are all in English. No doubt if a university buys a site license this could change, but will it allow for different language interfaces within the one site license? Whether introducing teaching Irish as a second language or teaching through the medium of Irish, having headings and output in a different language (English, French, Spanish, whatever) is a drawback and contrary to the best practice of language teaching methodology

On the plus side, however, ftp skills are not needed.

HP is a changeable interface. This gives it a linguistic and organisational adaptability that Blackboard lacks. HP can be translated into target language, which endears it to all teachers using ANSI standard characters. It also takes up approximately 20kb per exercise, so quite a few fit on a floppy disk at a time.

On the other hand, for www purposes, webspace and ftp skills are needed, the lack of which could prevent dissemination and development of the collaborative process.