

Guest introduction

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This volume of *Teanga* contains empirically-oriented contributions that are to a large extent based on M.A. theses submitted to the Department of German at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth. Although these articles examine issues with regard to the teaching and learning of German, the hypotheses, the research designs, and indeed most of the results can be applied to other foreign language contexts because all foreign language teaching and learning processes share the same basic factors on an environmental level, e.g. teachers, students, textbooks, institutional frameworks, curricular aims, etc. On a more intrinsic level these processes have in common highly influential factors such as age, motivation, teaching strategies, learning strategies, didactical and methodological considerations, attitudes, developmental issues, cognitive styles, curricula, progression, and the contexts of culture, pragmatics, and other non-linguistic elements. Therefore this edition of *Teanga* is not addressed to a rather narrow audience of teachers and researchers in German; rather, it is aimed at anyone interested in theoretical considerations and practical measures in the area of foreign language teaching and learning in Ireland — and beyond.

The timing of this issue of *Teanga* is no coincidence. After a decade of unprecedented expansion in the cohort of foreign language students in Ireland in second- and third-level education in the 1990s, student numbers have been falling in recent years (for detailed numbers cf. Expert Group 2005: 22 and Royal Irish Academy 2006: 2). From the point of view of the individual pupil who is faced with many different subjects in school, there may be many reasons for avoiding the study of a foreign language, namely (a) the perceived difficulty of learning complicated grammatical and diverse functional-notional structures of a foreign language; (b) the dominance of English as a world language (hence the notion from a native English speaker's perception that 'English is enough'); (c) the long period of time necessary to become even modestly communicatively proficient in the foreign language; (d) the perceived necessity of de-motivating rote learning of

vocabulary lists; (e) listening to and producing strange sounds (phonetics); (f) experiencing diverse, potentially confusing, and identity-threatening cultural patterns for the construction of meaning; and many other factors.

Although one could easily deconstruct each of these perceived difficulties, the cold fact of falling student numbers points to a need to reflect constructively upon the broader social, pedagogical, political, and institutional context of foreign language learning, as well as to focus critically on the practical realities of foreign language teaching with the aim of developing possible constructive measures in this area. Whereas this issue of *Teanga* tries to address the latter, more practical, aspects of foreign language learning and teaching, the aforementioned political and institutional factors also require mention here because they exert a very decisive influence on the practice of foreign language teaching and learning in the Republic of Ireland. Among the main factors preventing the collapse of student numbers taking foreign languages in secondary schools are the matriculation requirements of Trinity College Dublin (which requires one language in addition to English, be it Irish or a foreign language) and in particular the requirements of the four constituent universities of the National University of Ireland (Cork, Dublin, Galway, and Maynooth), which require Irish and a foreign language for students to be admitted to any of their courses. In some of these universities informal discussions have taken place recently as to the possibility of abolishing these strict matriculation requirements in order to create a level playing field for all seven universities in the Republic of Ireland.¹ Should the language requirement for the constituent universities of the National University be abandoned, which at least for the moment seems unlikely, the fate of the foreign languages would be similar to that suffered by Latin: the number of students of Latin in secondary and tertiary education collapsed when it ceased to be a university matriculation requirement in the Republic of Ireland.

This precarious situation is not helped by the absence of a national language policy in the Irish Republic which could provide a constructive framework for the status of languages, rather than leaving it to university administrators. A national language policy which includes English, Irish, and foreign languages is also desirable from a European point of view, as it is the stated policy of the European Union that every citizen of the European Union should

be able 'to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue' (Commission 1995: 47). What is more, knowledge of foreign languages facilitates greater intercultural understanding (cf. Harden and Witte 2000) and helps to counter xenophobia, racism, and intolerance because in the process of accessing other linguistic and cultural systems for meaning-making, the taken-for-granted native personal and socio-cultural constructs are automatically being questioned and hence become relative in the mind of the learner (cf. Witte 2004; Harden, Witte, and Köhler 2006). Clearly, the learning of foreign languages is pedagogically and psychologically advantageous for the individual and it is socially, economically, and politically beneficial for the multilingual European Union — or, in fact, any country. But as long as the status of foreign languages is not enshrined in a coherent national education policy, this might be put at risk in the Republic of Ireland by short-sighted administratively-based decisions.² Consequently, the Royal Irish Academy Committee for Modern Language, Literary & Cultural Studies suggests in its report on 'Language Policy & Language Planning in Ireland', which is based on the outcome of discussions at an international conference on language policy, held in Dublin Castle in February 2006, that a 'National Advisory Body' for language planning should be established in order 'to liaise with language professionals, politicians and all stakeholders in society. This body would research the changing linguistic needs of society, and propose a suitable language policy' (RIA 2006: 9).

However, the emphasis of this volume of *Teanga* is not on language policy. It focuses, rather, on empirical studies which examine particular aspects of the practical foreign-language teaching and learning process in the light of relevant theoretical considerations. Thus it tries to help overcome the dichotomy between theory and practice. Theory is often perceived by practitioners as providing conflicting explanations, being highly abstract and largely irrelevant for the immediate classroom practice of mediating foreign languages, whereas teaching practice in the classroom is seen by many students and teachers as dreary, repetitive, uninspiring, and largely ignorant of theoretical developments. It is therefore important to change the dynamics between researchers and practitioners by empowering teachers and students to get actively involved in research with a view of changing their — and others' — classroom practice. This is the general context for most of the

articles in this volume, since all the contributors are engaged in the daily process of teaching German as a foreign language in the secondary or tertiary educational sectors in the Republic of Ireland.

The scope of research represented in this volume is derived from the definition of the subject area 'applied linguistics' or, in German, *Sprachlehr-/lernforschung*, roughly translated as 'research on how to teach and learn (foreign) languages'. The German term for the subject area of applied linguistics implies already the importance of a broad field of interdisciplinary research that includes the disciplines of linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, anthropology, educational politics, cultural studies, ethnology, and sociology. Relevant aspects of these reference disciplines are to be considered when analysing aspects of teaching and learning foreign languages. However, this tendency to reach out to other disciplines has attracted criticism, as noted by Grabe (2002: 10):

Critics note that applied linguistics is too broad and too fragmented, that it demands expert knowledge in too many fields, and that it does not have a set of unifying research paradigms. However, it is possible to interpret applied linguistics as a discipline much in the way that disciplines are defined. It has a core and a periphery, and the periphery blurs into other disciplines that may or not want to be allied.

Despite this inherent multidisciplinaryity, applied linguistics is not a conglomerate of borrowed research from other disciplines. It is an interdisciplinary subject with its own focus or core; it has been firmly represented in many universities since the 1970s. *Sprachlehr-/lernforschung* examines both teaching and learning processes in relation to mediating foreign languages and their cultural contexts. It considers the activity of teaching as being determined by the learning process because the foreign language student and his or her learning needs, not some external curricula or textbooks, must form the basis of all reflections and actions on the part of the teacher and the researcher. Since the early 1980s the field of *Sprachlehr-/lernforschung* has been complemented in the German-speaking countries by the *Interkulturelle Germanistik* (intercultural German studies) which puts more emphasis on literature and the broader cultural context of foreign language

learning (rather than the language and processes of learning). This (inter-) cultural emphasis is reflected in the most recent foreign language methodology, the Intercultural Approach. This approach recognizes that there is more to learning a foreign language than memorizing vocabulary and morpho-grammatical rules: understanding the immediate situational and the broader socio-cultural context of a human language in general, and speech acts in particular, is a prerequisite for meaningful and competent usage of any human language. After all, when native speakers communicate, they do so not only with their individual voices but also with 'the established knowledge of their native community and society, the stock of metaphors this community lives by, and the categories they use to represent their experiences' (Kramsch 1993: 43). By using this established pool of knowledge, on the one hand, the speaker's way of speaking is predictable for native language speakers. This can be done, for example, by the use of culture-specific 'contextualisation cues' (Gumperz 1992) through which 'speakers and hearers can convey to each other what their expectations are with respect to the communication they are engaged in' (Kramsch 1998: 27). On the other hand, the constructs of meaning are immediately comprehensible because they rely on a shared conceptual social and cultural background.

In order to become competent users of any human language, including foreign languages, the acquisition of pragmatic and socio-cultural knowledge must be part and parcel of the learning process because cultural values are reflected by and carried through language. This learning process is, for acquiring the mother tongue, the process of socialization into the community, which includes the acquisition of linguistic, social, and cultural rules, values, norms, and standards. For the foreign language learner who does not grow up as a bilingual speaker, this learning process must be facilitated in the artificiality of the foreign language classroom (cf. Witte 2006).

In the course of the history of foreign language methodologies the role and scope of language (i.e. grammar) itself has undergone massive changes. Grammar has been widely considered to be the epitome of the 'pure language', a fixed system of formal structures, freed from its functional context, which can be learned with a precisely prescribed linear progression as to the level of difficulty. Teaching and learning a foreign language, therefore, has meant focusing on language as a system, a notion that was introduced by

Saussure (1916). By separating 'langue' from 'parole', the way seemed clear to ignore the messy extralinguistic influences on language usage. This structural approach was echoed and thus prolonged by Chomsky's (1965) dichotomy between 'competence' and 'performance', which meant that linguistics could focus on the system of language without taking into consideration the actual usage of language in real-life situations. Chomsky's approach has been described as 'pseudo-science' (Beedham 1995: 43) which distracted from the real task of linguistics, i.e., describing language as a primarily spoken instrument of communication and a tool for cognitive construction.

Indeed, over the past 40 years or so there has been a move away from seeing language as an isolated sign system towards a more contextualized approach, based on research in pragmalinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and language philosophy. The relevance of the socio-cultural context of language, seen as a communicative tool, has increasingly been recognized, and consequently foreign language methodologies have progressively moved away from a purely morphosyntactical emphasis in foreign language learning towards a more inclusive view of understanding not only linguistic but also socio-cultural patterns, structures, norms, and values (cf. Witte 2004).

There have also been other, more recent developments on the level of theoretical meta-discourse, affecting research paradigms in our discipline. Postmodernist discourses in the humanities have had an effect on applied linguistics in that the computational paradigm, which had been dominant since the 1960s in foreign language teaching and learning research, has come in for severe criticism. In the computational paradigm, based on cognitive psychology, the mind is seen in a Cartesian manner as an autonomous entity. For Descartes, the self is a profoundly asocial phenomenon whose mind is a mysterious inner theatre-space, in which depicted events are 'viewed' by the use of a strange 'inner eye'. Followers of Descartes took for granted that there were mental processes guiding people's observable behaviour. Therefore mentalists assumed that these mysterious inner mental processes could be hypothetically deduced in controlled experiments. 'By using the framework of the hypothetico-deductive conception of theory, they thought that one could create a human science that got over the difficulty that had spawned the unsatisfactory metaphysics of behaviorism' (Harré and Gillet 1994: 11). The hypothetico-deductive method

tried to access mental processes that previously had been considered an inaccessible 'black box' by behaviourism. The basic research paradigm was thus that hypotheses of what goes on in the mind were formed; then, in controlled empirical experiments, these were tested and evaluated; subsequently logical conclusions were drawn about the laws of mental operations. The newer version of the cognitive tradition, information processing, focuses on the mechanisms responsible for the processing of information or knowledge (giving rise to metaphors of input, output, short-term memory, long-term memory, intake, container, hardware system [brain], software programme [mind], etc.). The main assumption behind this computational branch of the cognitive tradition is the belief that mental processes are rule-governed, just like information-processing mechanisms in computers, which follow strict rules. Thus rules were inserted into the hidden recesses of the mind, trying to explain the workings of the mind. If human mental processes are rule-governed, the rules somehow need to be implemented into the complex process of learning foreign languages. Many researchers in second language acquisition based their research on this paradigm (for a list of examples see Johnson 2004: 46-84). Research results were gained under artificial experimental conditions: a pre-test was conducted, followed by a post-test, and the results were compared with those of a control group which was not exposed to the experiments.

These models clearly send a wrong message to the foreign language learner, namely: once various language competencies included in these models are acquired, competent language performance in real-life situations is achieved automatically. However, these models are based on the researcher's idealized and homogenized perceptions of human communication; rules based on the grounds of these models, therefore, cannot represent all relevant aspects of communication. As Bruner (1996: 5) remarks:

But ... the rules common to all information systems do not cover the messy, ambiguous, and context-sensitive processes of meaning making, a form of activity in which the construction of highly 'fuzzy' and metaphoric category systems is just as notable as the use of specifiable categories for sorting inputs in a way to yield comprehensible outputs.

It is not sufficient just to 'observe' mental processes as a complex mechanism geared to respond in certain ways. The individual self is not an autonomous, self-contained entity but fundamentally a social construct. This recognition is not new; it was already placed at the core of the Russian school of 'socio-historical psychology', established by Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Gal'perin in the 1920s. It aims to overcome the Cartesian dualism and to restore proper balance between external and internal human realities. It takes into account the dynamic roles of social contexts, individuality, intentionality, and the socio-cultural, historical and institutional backgrounds of the individual involved in cognitive growth. External and internal realities are united by the mediating power of the most elaborated system of signs — language. This framework, unlike the cognitive tradition, assumes the existence of multiple realities that are interpreted differently by each individual because of inherent different voices, acquired in socialization. On this basis, neo-Vygotskyian notions of intersubjectivity, co-construction of the shared realities, and dialogized heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) are considered important characteristics of the dialogical approach (cf. Johnson 2004: 16). The aims of foreign language research, based on this tradition, would require an investigation of interactive processes that facilitate the learner to understand the foreign language and culture and would enable him or her to become an active participant in the target language culture. Since the individual derives his or her knowledge socially and dialogically, the focus of such research should be the individual language learner and his or her learning processes. This also requires an investigation of the immediate social context of the learning process, namely interaction and co-construction of knowledge in the foreign language classroom.

Although these are very complex theoretical issues, applied linguistics is driven by problems that occur in the real world of teaching and learning languages rather than theoretical explorations. Consequently, its research has to be situated in limited local contexts of language, culture, and social pragmatics. Clearly, a limitation to the paradigms, resources, and research tools of one subject area cannot be adequate for analysing the extremely complex problems of practical foreign language learning and teaching. Therefore an array of research instruments and methodologies of different disciplines must be consulted in attempting to analyse and subsequently trying to solve the specific research problem at

hand. Van Lier (1997: 103) characterizes the difference between the applied linguist and the theoretical linguist as follows:

I think that it is the applied linguist, who works with language in the real world, who is most likely to have a realistic picture of what language is, and not the theoretical linguist who sifts through several layers of idealization. Furthermore, it may well be the applied linguist who will most advance humankind's understanding of language, provided that he or she is aware that no one has a monopoly on the definitions and conduct of science, theory, language research, and truth.

The articles in this volume of *Teanga* reflect some of these considerations. While some contributions are rooted in the computational paradigm, others are based on the dialogical approach. But whatever the theoretical foundations of the articles are, they all analyse relevant aspects of the practice of teaching and learning German as a foreign language. These empirical studies focus on the socio-pragmatic context in the Republic of Ireland; therefore they aim to provide a platform for discussion and further studies in the Irish context.

In the first contribution, Anna Maria Lysaght examines the role and functions of *Landeskunde* (cultural studies) in the German language classroom, based on findings of an empirical study conducted in schools in Co. Kildare. After having defined the concept of *Landeskunde*, she analyses its status in the Irish curriculum and discovers some inconsistencies between the Junior Certificate and Senior Certificate syllabi. In sharp contrast to students' very positive attitudes toward cultural studies, their actual knowledge of the target country and its geography, culture, and people is very disappointing. An interesting finding of the study is the fact that stereotypes about Germans and Germany seem to increase in the course of the 5-year programme of learning German in Irish secondary schools. This clearly points to the necessity of integrating more cultural elements into the German language classroom in Ireland.

Carlos Sosa's article reappraises an alternative methodology of foreign language teaching and learning, namely Charles Curran's Community Language Learning (CLL), in the context of a communicative and task-based framework. CLL is basically derived from

psychological counselling and transposed into the foreign language classroom. CLL is an extremely learner-centred and meaning-driven approach, thus meeting some of the crucial criteria for task-based learning procedures and complementing interactive communicative teaching and learning activities. Some principles of CLL clearly could be integrated in a very constructive manner in theory and practice of task-based learning and into communicative classroom activities.

Annette Simon examines in her article the levels of motivation and confidence among 69 first-year learners at Dublin City University. The transition from secondary school to university exposes students to significant changes in the methodology and the content of learning in the German class. In particular there is a transition from a primarily memory-based approach to foreign language learning in secondary school to a more analytical approach dominant in universities. This change can be challenging for the motivation and confidence of students, especially in the field of learning formal grammar.

Bláthnaid Grimes focuses on the motivation and attitudes of German language learners at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth. Whereas Annette Simon concentrated on first-year students and grammar classes, this article is more inclusive as to the range of students (80 students from all three undergraduate years) and the range of issues covered. These issues include a number of questions, including the initial motivation to study German; attitudes towards German, Germany, and Germans; and long-term perspectives on how students plan to apply their knowledge of German after university. The empirical study exposes some contradictions between students' initial expectations in studying German and the reality of their perceived standard of German which, however, do not seem to diminish their motivation significantly.

In their article, Jennifer Bruen and Thomas Wagner examine the theory and practice of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), based on a pilot module taught at Dublin City University. In CLIL the focus of attention is not drawn to linguistic elements such as grammar during class as they arise, but the focus is on meaning or communication. Thus it is commonly recognized in CLIL that one or more subjects can be taught in the foreign language, in so far as students can understand the basic content. A beneficial side-effect of this procedure would be the mere exposure to the foreign language, where students can acquire

certain structures of that language as a by-product. In Bruen and Wagner's empirical study, a second-year course on contemporary German and Austrian history, culture, politics, and society was taught in German and subsequently evaluated.

Ann Marie King's article is based on a study carried out in 1995-96. It compares the preparatory activities, the actual writing process, and the procedures of revision as they occur in (a) traditional 'pen and pencil'-style writing and (b) writing with a word processor, in the context of broader foreign language skills. This empirical study is, in the meantime, of almost historical value as the usage of word processing has exploded since the mid-1990s and is nowadays the norm among third-level students for writing academic essays. The results of the study are, nevertheless, still interesting, perhaps even because of this time-lag, as the two writing processes in the foreign language are organized in completely different manners.

Susanne Judt-Keary's article examines in some detail the processes that are involved in learning writing skills in German. Her study focuses on six 14-year-old learners of German who are preparing for the written part of the Junior Certificate examinations. Particular attention is paid to three sub-processes of writing in the foreign language: the preparatory phase of planning, the writing process itself, and parallel or subsequent revising and re-viewing. By comparing these processes to the corresponding processes in English, it becomes evident that they are not fully transferable from English to German because of severe gaps in students' knowledge of German grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. The study exposes a very fragmented style of preparing, writing, and revising very short texts, which leaves learners frustrated with their progress or lack thereof. One way forward, proposed by the author, is the use of more authentic and recipient-oriented material.³

In the final article, Rosanne Diedrichs analyses processes of teaching and learning the gender of nouns in German, an area which most foreign language learners find immensely difficult as gender seems to be assigned to nouns in a completely arbitrary fashion. The article argues that the latter is not the case: there are indeed a number of rules and strategies that can help students in their efforts to learn noun gender in German in a structured manner. Hence the author proposes to change the traditional gender

order of *der, die, das* to *die, das, der* on the basis of the quantitative occurrence of the respective noun genders in German.

Notes

1. From the academic year 2003-04 NUI Maynooth has accepted any recognized subject in place of the third language for engineering courses only. In 2007 University College Dublin and NUI Maynooth decided to abolish the third-language matriculation requirement for some science courses. This dilution of the language matriculation requirement, one fears, might be the beginning of the erosion of a third-language matriculation requirement for the National University of Ireland.

2. This fact has also been discussed by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2005) in their report 'Demand & Supply of Foreign Languages in the Enterprise Sector', which highlights the future benefits for exports and foreign direct investment that would flow from an increased emphasis on language skills by the State: 'As communication, and hence language skills, are central to services, it is imperative that the [Irish] State understands, and is in a position to satisfy, the requirements of the enterprise sector in relation to services aimed at foreign markets' (Expert Group 2005: 4).

3. Susanne Judt-Keary came to NUI Maynooth as an MA student in 2000 and was conferred with the MA in 2002. Subsequently she joined the Department of German as an occasional staff member. She was not only a gifted teacher and promising researcher but she was also well loved by colleagues and students alike. Her sudden and untimely death in 2005 came as a huge shock to us all. The paper included in this volume is a preliminary version that has been slightly edited.

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