

Widening access to language learning in the institutes of technology in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland have been called to widen participation in language learning by the government's *Languages Connect Strategy*. The challenge is to increase the level of participation from 4% to 20%. Moreover, a recent nationwide study has revealed a grassroots demand for language provision that is currently unmet, and that prevailing perceptions of a lack of curricular space for languages may be one of the overriding obstacles to change. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) provides a possible solution to this dilemma, as it enables various forms of content located on virtual learning platforms to be accessed from anywhere. There is certainly a case for widening participation in language learning by harnessing new technologies. Online platforms create virtual spaces for language learning that transcend the confines of the traditional language classroom. MALL provides unlimited access to learning content and offers the potential for synchronous interaction with native speakers. Existing market leaders of MALL certainly have a global reach; however, their underlying pedagogy has been called into question. Further research and innovation are needed to create pedagogically sound learning platforms that might motivate language acquisition. Third level language educators need to create online learning pathways for languages, thereby overcoming perceived obstacles to change and bringing the second language acquisition process into the 21st century.

Keywords: languages connect strategy, recent research, virtual MALL learning platforms.

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1. Introduction

Irish HEIs in the Institute Of Technology (IOT) sector are in a state of flux, as they seek to reinvent themselves as Technological Universities (TUs). While this period of transition presents major challenges to the sector in terms of curriculum and resources, it also provides significant opportunity for innovation. Indeed, the Irish government has provided leadership in this regard, by calling upon third level institutions to equip Irish graduates with 21st century skills, in order to prepare the Irish economy for a competitive global workplace. The *Languages Connect Strategy* has prioritised linguistic skills as having a pivotal role to play in Ireland's future economic and social wellbeing (DES, 2017). Nonetheless, it is estimated that only 4% of Irish third level students currently learn second languages. Why does Ireland perform so badly when it comes to second language acquisition? Recent research has investigated this complex problem and may help guide educators in finding solutions (Carthy, 2017). MALL, i.e. learning pathways on Moodle, Blackboard (or other similar learning management systems) would certainly be worth investigating, as traditional curricular pathways appear to have been exhausted in many IOTs/TUs. Their popularity in global terms demonstrates their potential to widen access to language learning, as demonstrated by some of the market leaders of MALL.

2. Context

The current disconnect between Ireland's national government strategy and local IOT practices in relation to language provision is alarming. After many years of lobbying for a commitment at national level, language enthusiasts welcomed the long-awaited *Language Connect Strategy* in 2017 (DES, 2017). The strategy explicitly articulates how important linguistic skills are for Ireland's future economic and social development, and sets specific targets for both second and third level education. Admittedly, the goals set in the strategy are challenging, with a target of 20% participation in language learning among third level students. Unfortunately, these national priorities are not filtering down to local level; three years into this nine-year roadmap, the impact at third level is still minimal. Indeed, anecdotal evidence would suggest that the situation has deteriorated since the launch of the strategy. It would appear that the lack of alignment between local practices and the national strategy has led to some languages disappearing completely off the curriculum and the redeployment of language staff. There is clearly a need to address this anomaly by creating innovative learning pathways which may not have been considered hitherto. Research may enable educators to find a way forward.

3. Recent research

A nationwide investigation of the IOT sector may enable some light to be shed on this dilemma. This study collected quantitative and qualitative data from lecturers and students from 2012-2016, exploring the impact of institutional policy on attitudes towards learning languages (Carthy, 2017). Among the most significant findings is a grassroots demand for language learning, evident in both student and lecturer data, contrary to widespread perceptions. A lack of appropriate learning pathways in the traditional curriculum IOTs/TUs means that this appetite is not currently being met. Furthermore, there are significant qualitative and quantitative lecturer data suggesting that languages have slowly been squeezed out of the curriculum and there is currently a lack of traditional curricular space for them. On a more positive note, however, the findings from both students and lecturers have revealed that adults can both enjoy and succeed at learning languages, in spite of prior negative learning experiences or indeed having had none at all. This unexpected finding further strengthens the case for providing learning pathways for languages at third level. Educators need to explore virtual spaces in order to widen access to language learning and satisfy the demand evidenced here.

4. The potential of MALL

MALL might enable the IOTs to align themselves with the national strategic priorities. Various studies have been carried out into the potential of MALL to stimulate language learning in both formal and informal contexts (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Viberg & Grönlund, 2012). MALL allows language learning to transcend the confines of the traditional language classroom. These virtual pathways provide an instant solution to the actual, and indeed perceived, lack of space for languages in the IOTs. Both synchronous and asynchronous tools could be used to create a rich interactive learning environment to stimulate language acquisition. Synchronous tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Skype would facilitate authentic verbal interaction with native speakers, while asynchronous tools such as Panopto, Kahoot, or Padlet would enable learners to reflect and consolidate their learning as and when they choose. This innovative virtual space would enable learning pathways to extend across disciplines, and more importantly, create bridges between individual IOTs as they merge into TUs. Furthermore, MALL has the potential to provide transnational communication channels with partner colleges across Europe, and indeed beyond. There is a strong case for harnessing new technologies in order to overcome the obstacles to change, thereby enabling the implementation of the Irish *Languages Connect Strategy* (Carthy, 2019).

5. Current market leaders of MALL

In this context, the market leaders of MALL are worth considering. Their global reach demonstrates how popular these learning pathways can be. While there is little doubt about their popularity, some scholars are sceptical about their underlying pedagogy. Lotherington has conducted a survey into the prevailing pedagogies of these MALL apps and raised concerns about the approach used (Lotherington, 2018). Duolingo, Babbel, and Memrise are some of the learning apps under investigation. She claims that behaviourist pedagogical theories inform the learning pathways, with an overreliance on repetition and memorisation. Elsewhere she refers to the use of “impoverished pedagogies from half a century ago” (Lotherington, 2018, p. 212). While acknowledging the popularity of these game-based platforms, she calls instead for creativity and imagination among developers. There is clearly a need for the emerging TUs to carve out new learning pathways, using pedagogically sound approaches that would satisfy the appetite for language learning identified above and stimulate others to take on this challenge.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, MALL could certainly be explored as a way of overcoming the obstacles identified to the implementation of Ireland’s *Languages Connect Strategy*. The popularity of existing MALL platforms demonstrates the potential of these technologies, with their user friendly and global accessibility. The lack of traditional curricular space which is preventing the creation of learning pathways could be overcome by carving out new virtual learning spaces. These pathways would go beyond both geographical and time constraints, operating in a cross curricular space and providing bridges between individual IOTs and indeed transnationally overcoming borders. These new learning spaces would not only enable the IOTs/TUs to equip their students with important linguistic and intercultural skills, but also connect with partner colleges across Europe and beyond, establish themselves globally as TUs, with an emphasis on developing 21st century skills in their graduates.

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