CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Teaching in unusual surroundings - Dún Chíomháin, a house in the countryside
Authors	Ní Riain, Isobel
Publication date	2019
Original Citation	Ní Riain, I. (2019) 'Teaching in unusual surroundings - Dún Chíomháin, a house in the countryside', Learning Connections 2019: Spaces, People, Practice, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland, 5-6 December, pp. 4-6. doi: 10.33178/LC.2019.01
Type of publication	Conference item
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/LC.2019.01
Rights	© 2019, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-10-17 09:58:09
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10734

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Teaching in unusual surroundings – Dún Chíomháin, a house in the countryside.

Isobel Ní Riain

Department of Modern Irish, UCC

Introduction

I teach the Irish language in University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. I lead weekend courses in Dún Chíomháin which is a house owned by UCC in West Kerry. The area in which the house is located forms part of the *Gaeltacht*, i.e. an Irish speaking area. The goal of the weekends is for the students to speak Irish to each other in an amenable language environment.

In Dún Chíomháin, a kitchen, a sitting room and a dining room make up the primary teaching spaces. The learning and teaching is conversational (Baker et al. 2002). The students and teacher interact naturally and without ceremony over cornflakes and toast. The meals are cooked by the students as the Irish words for utensils and tea towels and a host of unforeseen language needs all bubble up amongst the chaos of meal preparation. In Dún Chíomháin, students realise that they don't know the words for several everyday objects. Such words have never been taught to them, and they have never felt the need to know them before.

It is not always easy for students (first years of 18 or 19 years of age usually) to start speaking Irish to their peers when they habitually speak to them in English. I have been observing these problems for some years now and wondered what could be done to help students to make the switch form English to Irish.

Method and Findings

I decided to do research into the issue and chose to use group work as a means of helping students to work on tasks together through the medium of Irish. I got some funding from an Irish language organization to enable me to do this (COGG: *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta*). I carried out the research between 2017-2019. I wrote a book on my findings which was published earlier this year (Ní Riain 2019).

Students reported preferring to speak Irish in small groups (of 4 or 5) to speaking in a large group, which in this case would have comprised 15 people. Given that the house is quite a small environment when compared to UCC campus, students felt very relaxed about speaking in Irish after a short time. The difficulty is not getting the students to speak in Irish to each other when in a controlled situation, for example when doing group work, the difficulty arises during their free time, when they are without the guidance of a teacher, and have to establish Irish as the medium of communication for themselves.

My goal in using group work was to help form social bonds between the students that were forged through the medium of Irish. I hoped that they would continue to speak in Irish to each other when the group work was over and they were at liberty to choose either Irish or English.

Conclusion

A weekend is a very short period of time in which to achieve something as momentous as getting a young person to habitually speak in a second language to other people for whom it is also a second language and when all of them are more competent speaking in English. My findings were very positive, however. Students were unanimous in their wish to speak in Irish and even in their intension to speak in Irish during the weekends. It didn't always happen. I was encouraged though because it is clear that their attitude to Irish is very positive. Given more exposure to life in Dún Chíomháin and more trips to the Gaeltacht generally, I think they will take the plunge and start speaking to their peers in Irish.

Quite recently the hall or the *halla* located to the side of Dún Chíomháin as been renovated and fitted with state-of-the-art computers. It is now a very creative learning space. Students can work together in groups at large computer screens and do project work on the local area, for example. When doing this kind of work in the *halla* it is necessary to maintain a strong conversational element to the learning. To this end I always include oral presentations as part of this exercise whereby a member of each group presents the findings of the group orally. Students seem to enjoy the work we do in the *halla* immensely.

In general, Dún Chíomháin is a wonderful resource and we in the Modern Irish Dept and in the Spoken Irish Dept are very lucky to have access to it. I am currently working on a dictionary of useful everyday words, arranged thematically, for future students who will be spending time in Dún Chíomháin. There is a lot of information in this dictionary on household objects and household problems, on food and food allergies, and on all sorts of problems that crop up in Dún Chíomháin!

It has become clear to me over the years in Dún Chíomháin that conversational learning is the way forward in relation to teaching Irish. I don't mean by that that the teacher speaks to the student and the student speaks to the teacher. That too is important. However, what is more essential is that students speak to other students in small groups and gradually larger groups. The hope being that they will speak more and more Irish to each other not just in class but when mixing together outside of class.

References

Baker, A.C., & Jensen, P.J., & Kolb, D.A. Conversational Learning: An Experiential Approach to Knowledge Creation, available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1d1f/ad1cc7b950dc748655ac0a19102fbcc66c79.pdf (I visited this site on 5/08/2017)

Ní Riain, I. (2019). *Labhairt na Gaeilge – dúshláin agus réitigh*. Dublin: Coiscéim.