

## Exercising a Little Imagination with the Virtual Picture Album

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Drawings and photographs can be useful teaching tools, providing visual support when introducing or practicing vocabulary for concepts and objects not available in the classroom, depicting situations and events in which several things occur simultaneously, and reinforcing and practicing particular grammatical constructions. Pictures allow an instructor to design a balance of passive and active activities and group and individual work, and provide a fun, easy way to introduce a wide array of cultural information--illustrating houses, styles of dress, typical daily activities, etc. Moreover, pictures can stimulate students' imaginations and enthusiasm, encouraging involvement in the language course by adding another dimension to their learning skills and strategies.

Despite pedagogical advantages to using pictures, however, it can be difficult and time-consuming to find a variety of pictures appropriate for use in lessons--particularly for Celtic language teachers, who often work in isolation with limited resources, and thus are unable to share the effort and expense of such a task. One objective of the University of Minnesota's Less Commonly Taught Languages Project is to make instructional materials available on the Internet. Toward that end, the project has created the "Virtual Picture Album" (VPA), a website from which teachers can access digitized photographs and drawings. Thirty photographs from Ireland are among those currently available from the VPA website; all can be downloaded and used free of charge for educational purposes<sup>1</sup>.

The VPA also includes a link to sample exercises employing some of the available pictures. As research assistant for the LCTL Project, I developed some web-

based Irish exercises using items from the VPA. There are three different types of exercises, each type designed for use at a different point during a first-year course.<sup>2</sup> I used the second group of exercises with first-year students in one 50-minute class period spent in the computer lab. In each exercise, a photograph is accompanied by six sentences that purportedly describe or comment on it. Students are asked to state, for each sentence, whether it is true (*ceart*) or false (*mi-cheart*) with respect to the photo, and give evidence supporting their responses. All vocabulary and grammar used in these sentences was introduced previously, so the exercises served to review key grammatical constructions and recently acquired vocabulary presented in a new context. Additionally, students' responses to each statement provided grammar practice (e.g., changing plural to singular, negation, replacing one preposition with another). Most sentences present facts students could minimally confirm or deny, but some are more speculative, requiring them to use some creativity in responding.

I gave students the choice of working on the exercises individually or in pairs. Most were eager to work independently, although they interacted frequently with other students and me to remark on particular details in the pictures and confirm comprehension of the sentences. All were actively engaged throughout, averaging 5-10 minutes per exercise, depending on familiarity with the computer and the previously studied vocabulary and grammar, and on how detailed or creative their responses were.

During discussion of the exercises at the end of class, students' reactions were quite positive. Naturally, the most appealing aspect was the opportunity to view pictures of Ireland, especially pictures from the *Gaeltachtaí*. They liked the fact that the computer exercises allowed them to have individual copies of the pictures to work from, and also liked the opportunity to work at their own pace.<sup>3</sup> For my part, the VPA made a little imagination go a long way in creating an engaging context for language practice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A full description of the Virtual Picture Album and available materials can be found at the VPA website:

<http://carla.acad.umn.edu/VPA/VPA.html>

<sup>2</sup> These exercises were designed for a first-year course based on the textbook *Learning Irish* (Ó Siadhail 1980); thus, for example, the vocabulary and grammar I used in the first group of exercises corresponds to those found in the first 4-5 lessons in the text. The exercises could easily be adapted to accommodate a different textbook, though, or students at a different level. The complete set of sample exercises for Irish can be seen at

<http://carla.acad.umn.edu/VPA/Irish/exercises.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Teachers who don't have access to a computer lab could use copies of the exercises or pictures printed out in advance, although the quality of the printed photographs may not be as good.

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## Reviews

Ron Crow, *St. Patrick's Irish Primer, Book 1: Sanctus Patricius*, Carroll, Ohio, 1997.

Available from Ron Crow, Irish Home Tutor,  
 3990 Ravensport Road, Carroll, Ohio 43112.  
 \$15.99 for primer only. For all four books and cassettes \$249.95.  
 On installment plan, \$50.00 for first book and cassette and \$70.00  
 later for books and cassettes 2, 3, and 4.

This is the first of four books in a series and each one is accompanied by a cassette. The text is handsomely printed and each lesson begins with a reading or story followed by sections on vocabulary, grammar, and spelling together with aids to pronunciation. Of course, with the cassette, pronunciation is stressed.

There are ten readings in this book and all are attractively presented. The first reading is rather short, but readings get longer from lesson to lesson. The readings are given in large type with very generous margins and on the same pages with the readings there are drawings of ancient art or famous sites. St. Patrick is the subject of the lessons and each story is told by Maol Phádraig, a fictional follower of the saint. Ron Crow reads each lesson on the cassette and then comments on the text. He also introduces some simple sentences and these are repeated in subsequent lessons. In addition, he asks questions of the student and, after a pause, gives the correct answers. He then gives instructions on how to study.

In the book, each lesson is followed by questions on vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. The learner is told to check his answers in the Answer Key in the back of the book. Translations from English into Irish and Irish into English are given in the Answer Key.

Each lesson ends with a paragraph in English on Irish geography, tradition, and language. This provides an interesting break from the hard work of memorization.

Myles Dillon and Donncha Ó Cróinín, in *Irish: A Complete Introductory Course*, begin each of their lessons