

Irish language learning software: *SpeakWrite Irish* (<http://www.galmac.ie/SpeakWrite.htm>) and *Focail Draíochta* (www.ceolsoft.com).

The two software packages to be reviewed here, *SpeakWrite Irish* and *Focail Draíochta*, are just a few of the many software packages currently available to assist in the Irish language learning process. The reviews below will consider issues pertaining to content, user-friendliness, hardware needs, cost, and availability of each product.

Some readers will have already been introduced to *SpeakWrite Irish* while attending an Irish language summer school in Ireland in the 1990s. At the time, some may have been disappointed to know that *SpeakWrite* was available in the Apple form only. However, today one can order the product in either Mac or PC version.

SpeakWrite Irish is a fairly comprehensive language learning program available in three levels (volumes). This project was grant funded by the European Union through the Lingua/Socrates Program and developed collaboratively by the National University of Ireland, Galway, GalMac, and Quadrant Learning Systems. In Volume 1, which this review sampled, the themes are 'meeting a friend, making an acquaintance, a visit to the doctor, discussing a holiday, a conversation about clothes, at the supermarket, arranging the schools timetable, playing tennis with friends, attending a pop concert, and in the restaurant'. Each unit starts out with a substantial dialogue read by native speakers at natural speed. The program highlights each line as it is spoken. You can click on any word in the dialogue to hear it, receive a translation, hear the sentence that contains the word at natural or slow speed, see the sentence in English, and receive a grammar explanation in English that pertains to this sentence. Additionally, there is also a general grammar index that one can access in this and other activities. One can also see the entire dialogue text in English.

Related to the dialogue, there are a number of activities one can access after experiencing the dialogue. At the beginning level there are comprehension questions with multiple choice answers all in English. One can see the dialogue (in Irish) on the lower half of the screen as one answers the questions. Score is calculated and immediate feedback given. One difference here from other parts of the program and other similar software packages is that some of the English versions of names (that were in their Irish version in the dialogue) are used in the questions. In that one wants to reinforce the acquisition of the new language, it may have been more effective to always refer to 'Gearóid' as 'Gearóid' in both the English and Irish versions as opposed to using 'Garrett' in the English.

Roleplay is another activity based on the dialogue. Users are asked to take on one of the roles from the dialogue. They are prompted as to the general idea of what they should say. Additional prompts can be requested. They can record their lines and then compare their utterance with the course's sample. One can change one's role. The graphics are useful. Completion is yet another activity that provides the entire dialogue with cloze exercises. Students must type in their responses. Immediate feedback is given. A section entitled 'Further Study' allow students an extension activity integrating the theme, communicative aim, and grammar. In the Open Dialogue section, a character on the computer converses with the students. An oral question is asked and the student must pick one of several multiple choice answers including 'pardon me' and 'please write that out for me'. The questions are at native speed and include pictures of the character who is conversing with the student.

While I was only able to review level or version one, this software appears to be full of activities that are highly motivating and enjoyable to experience. For those planning to visit the Gaeltacht for the first or an additional time, the language speed (although it can be slowed down), themes, and pictures are motivating factors in themselves. The program is extremely user-friendly and enables the student to move around from activity to activity as needed. The user will need a CD-ROM drive, sound card, speakers, and microphone to be able to use all of the functions of this software. Initially, the largest negative factor regarding this software was its price. The three levels together cost £125 (or £50 per level) not including postage and packaging and 20% VAT. While just a few years ago this could have equalled \$200 US dollars, with the current favourable exchange rate, the US dollar equivalent has been reduced greatly. By visiting the above website, one can request more information (last year, GalMac offered sample CDs). If you prefer to write GalMac, their address is GalMac Computers Ltd., Liosbaun Industrial Estate, Tuam Road, Galway. Phone: + 353 (0)91 755222, Fax: + 353 (0)91 755491.

The second software package under review here is *Focail Draíochta/Magical Words* by Ceol Software. The goal of *Focail Draíochta* is vocabulary acquisition. Grammar and comprehension are only taught by way of vocabulary lessons. The themes and vocabulary taught supports the Irish language curriculum for schools in the Republic of Ireland and the package is designed for use by learners of six years of age and older. The software is wonderfully illustrated. The graphics will delight children and adults. One does not have the cultural component with this program that one experiences with *SpeakWrite Irish*. This is clearly aimed at projecting

Irish as a cosmopolitan and national language as opposed to a community-based and Gaeltacht language.

Ten themes are always accessible on the top of the screen. Clicking on one of these produces a list in either Irish or English of words related to this theme. Each Irish word is presented with a phrase using the word in context, the translation, a related drawing (that usually moves), plural, synonym, and the singular with the definite article. Both the singular and plural forms can be heard by clicking on them.

On the bottom of the page, one can click on pictures to go to the next or previous word, drill, notes, sound, and print. The notes give related Irish words with pictures for nouns and conjugations for verbs. 'Drill' here does not refer to practice, but rather to moving down sub-levels of a theme.

Focail Draíochta clearly is a reference tool with an extensive vocabulary of over 1200 words with excellent graphics to the point that one does not need to rely on the English translations. The ability to hear the pronunciation for both the singular and plural is something often missing in other resources (such as the *Foclóir Póca*). The article/noun combinations reminded the reviewer of the reference list at the end of *Buntús Foclóra*. In terms of North Americans learning Irish, this program is a valuable reference tool for the beginning and lower intermediate student and an excellent review package for middle and advanced intermediate students. While this is not a comprehensive language learning product, it lives up to its name in aiding with the learning of more *focail*/words.

One word of warning regarding *Focail Draíochta* concerns the type of processor needed. One needs to have a Pentium II processor or higher to use the software. The reviewer tried the software on his home Pentium I PC and his Pentium I laptop without success, so one is warned to heed the system requirements. A complete list of these can be found at the company's website, <http://www.ceolsoft.com/>. *Focail Draíochta* is cited as costing £25 or \$40.00 on their website. Postage for the United States is cited as \$7.00 for priority mail and \$5.00 for normal mail. For the latest prices and details, contact Ceol Software directly at info@ceolsoft.com.

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Announcements

The **8th annual conference of the NAACLT** will take place at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada from 24 May to 26 May 2002.

The NAACLT website, which is located at

www.naac.lt.org

provides further information on all NAACLT activities, membership matters, and other related topics.