Journal Writing as a Method of Student Motivation in Irish Language Class

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This article begins with a description of a journal writing assignment given in a first-year university class in Irish. Three sample journal entries are analyzed for grammar, vocabulary, and style. In each case salient errors are identified and the journals are related to the students' overall performance. The pros and cons of using creative projects as part of elementary classwork are discussed. Finally, recommendations are made for teachers considering the use of journal writing as a motivational method.

Although there is abundant literature on first-language (L1) journal writing (Elbow 1973, Elbow 1981, Shuman 1981, Sullivan and van Becker 1982, to name just a few), and ample literature on second-language (L2) writing when L2 is a widely studied language such as English, Spanish, or French (Connor and Kaplan 1987, Heald-Taylor 1989, Johns 1986, Kroll 1990, Ramirez 1987, Zamel 1983), there is considerably less information available on writing by students learning those languages variously described as "minority languages" (cf. Crystal 1994), "less commonly taught languages" (a widely used term endorsed by the Penn Language Center, where the class under analysis was taught) or "lesser used languages" (the term used in the official name of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages). These terms are fraught with ambiguity and contradiction and reflect an insider/outsider bias regarding the language. This issue cannot be addressed here in sufficient depth to do it justice; it will perhaps suffice to say that Irish is a "native minority" language within its home country where it may be "lesser used" but, as a required subject in the Republic of Ireland's school curriculum, is not "less commonly taught." In the United States, Irish can be described as an "immigrant" minority language which is both "lesser used" and "less commonly taught." Among the few research endeavors which do address the use of journal writing in less commonly taught languages in the United States are those concerning Hungarian by Gedeon (1993) and Hartig (1993), which partially inspired this author's research on the topic as it pertains to Irish.

This "minority language" category includes Irish, a language whose population of active native speakers in Irish-speaking communities has been reported as having declined to as low as 8,751 (Hindley 1990: 250) while its population of at least nominally proficient speakers (native and second-language) has been reported at the high figure of 1,095,830 in preliminary figures for 1991 by the Irish government (Breathnach 1994). The latter statistic is generally considered unreliable in that it includes many schoolchildren, who may be very ambivalent about the language and who are assessed for the census by their parents. Conservative, but not unduly pessimistic, estimates for the mid-to-late twentieth century onwards generally range from 30,000 to 120,000 (Blyn 1991; Crystal 1987; Grimes: 1992). Although interest in the language is growing among Irish-Americans (Ihde 1994a), there is no cohesive Irish-speaking diaspora in the United States. According to Ihde (1994b), there are few accredited Irish language courses being taught in the United States. Many of the courses which do exist are community-focused, often unaccredited, and do not assign homework, even for basic grammar drill, not to mention requiring an added component such as journal writing. Therefore, there is virtually no published information available on journal writing in Irish in American university classrooms.
THE 1994-95 ELEMENTARY IRISH LANGUAGE CLASS: AN OVERVIEW

Before proceeding with the journal-writing analysis, a description of the class will be provided to set the assignment in context. Accredited Irish classes were started at the University in 1990 as an initiative of the Penn Language Center, which sponsors the teaching of approximately fifty less commonly taught languages. The course continues for two years, at the elementary and intermediate levels, and it fulfills the University's language requirement, a fact which is very important to most of the undergraduates in the class. The class meets for 4 1/2 hours a week.

All of the ten students were beginners to Irish, although one had had minimal exposure to the language in school as a child during the year his family spent in Ireland. All were at least partially Irish-American, and most were taking the course as an elective and/or for personal enrichment, not part of a major such as Irish Studies or Celtic Studies, neither of which is available at the University. One freshman planned to continue in Celtic Studies for graduate work but wanted a broader liberal arts background for her undergraduate work.

All of the students had previously studied second languages, as this is required for admission to the University; most had studied Romance languages, particularly Spanish. In most cases however, their prior language-learning experience had not motivated them to choose language-oriented majors. In a class survey, they reported career plans and majors in fields such as biology, engineering, finance, psychology and social work. Irish was clearly an elective interest for all except the one future Celtologist.

The journal-writing assignment was added to the course in an attempt to personalize the students' language learning experience and enhance the students' motivation to learn material which otherwise may seem uninteresting to them at times, such as verb conjugations or noun declensions.

Journal Writing as a Method of Student Motivation

The cultural differences presented in Irish pedagogical materials, whether they represent contemporary Gaeltacht life, the urban revival, or folklore retold, make it difficult for American college-age students to juxtapose learning Irish with their own life experience.

The proficiency goals in this class were in four areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Other methods used in class were grammar exercises, dictation, reading short fiction passages, conversations, and student presentations in Irish. Student attendance at Irish events was strongly encouraged and the class as a group attended an Irish play and movie, which though in English, provided the basis for discussion of Hibemo-English idiom as a vehicle for understanding Irish. Assessment was based primarily on homework, quizzes, tests, and class participation. Completion of the journal and presentation of one week's entry to the class counted for 5% of the course grade; journal entries were not graded though they were corrected and received commentary.

THE JOURNAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

At the beginning of the semester, students were instructed to write approximately five sentences weekly, describing scenes or activities, or any other subjects which they chose. They were to use about five new words for each entry, to be found in the Foclór Póca. New words were to be listed at the bottom of each entry, with gender. The instructor suggested that students rely mainly on nouns for their new words, since new verbs, other than verbal nouns, would be difficult to use correctly at the beginning stages of learning the language. The last day of class was devoted to students' oral presentations of previous or newly written journal entries. The presentations were graded, not so much on correctness as on preparation, delivery, and the students' familiarity with their own material.

All students signed release forms indicating their awareness of the study and that they would be identified by
pseudonyms; unless otherwise stated, the students are all of traditional college age. Journal entries are printed below as submitted; all translations are by the author of this article.

**JOURNAL SAMPLES**

The first student, Seán, had a slight advantage over the others in that he had spent one year of his elementary education in Ireland and had studied Irish in school there, although Irish was not the family language. Seán's family is very much in touch with its Irish roots, and his father recorded for the instructor an informal session of reminiscences which demonstrate a vivid memory of the idiom spoken by the older generation of his family, including Hibemio-English and even a few Irish phrases.

At the beginning of the year, Seán claimed not to remember any of the language except answering "tá" ("yes") to questions and a few phrases. As the semester progressed, it was clear that some underlying memories were coming through. Of all the students, Seán seemed most able to express his thoughts in natural Irish word order and to incorporate new grammatical structures or irregular forms into an underlyingly Irish framework. Other students, in contrast, would often regress slightly as new and difficult forms were learned; they would abandon recently learned grammatical forms, vocabulary, spelling, or word order in favor of an English framework, as they attempted to use new structures.

The following entry describes Seán's visit home over the Thanksgiving break:


Wednesday I went home. I ate turkey and apple pie. I drank ale, porter, and poteen. I say nonsense when I drink porter. When I don't drink porter, I am thirsty. Friday I was thirsty and I drank ale. Saturday I will go away again. I will go to Washington D.C. My second cousin will get married. I will not drink porter. I will drink champagne.

Despite some awkward or incorrect usages, the text flows well and can be corrected with little difficulty. The most obvious mistake, the omission of the relative "when" (nuair a) had not been covered yet in class. Seán had apparently tried to use this based on the dictionary entry for "when" in **Foclóir Póca**. Even if the relative "when" had been covered by this time in class, that is no guarantee that the student would have used the correct form. Of the students in this class, only those who had studied German had prior knowledge of the grammatical difference between the relative "when" and the interrogative "when."

The second entry is by an older, non-traditional student, Séamus, who had frequently visited Ireland and who remembered some Irish phrases and Hibemio-English idioms used by his relatives. His writings included some deliberate use of humor, such as a recaptioning in Irish of one of Gary Larson's "Far Side" cartoons, with a result that Larson's famous cows were drinking Guinness and grumbling about the farmer in Irish. This work was presented orally in class and clearly achieved Séamus' desired result of making the class laugh heartily. Sometimes Séamus' use of humor was effective, despite grammar mistakes; other times, his intentions were less clear, as the following example shows:
However, his basic grammar suffers in his creative applications of the language.

The third sample, by Máire, the future Celticist, was a recipe for flummery, a sweet oatmeal desert. The text of her recipe follows:

Flummery, an t-oideas:


Flummery, the recipe:

Put the oatmeal in the shallow dish. Wash with cold water and wait a day. Wash with fresh water. Put oatmeal, with fresh water, in the saucepan and cook. Pour in the dish. Eat with sugar and wine, ale, or cider.

Máire made good use of the imperative mood of the verbs, which was emphasized early in the course. In this she efficiently related the grammatical structure learned in class to a natural context, such as a recipe, in which the structure would occur. Of the two major mistakes, one could have been avoided with closer attention to parts of speech as listed in the dictionary; the other was almost unavoidable based on the material covered up to this point in the class. The use of the noun “thanalacht” ("thinness" "shallowness") in an adjective position is a result of incorrect dictionary use, usually manifested in student journals by assuming that the first form of a word listed is the one desired; students had been advised to use caution in selecting the exact form of the word they wanted to use. Máire did however correctly apply attention to the word she thought was an adjective, as the students had
learned to do with feminine singular nouns. The second critical error is the omission of the "h" usually prefixed to nouns beginning with vowels which follow the preposition "ie." This detail of usage had not been taught yet and could not have been predicted by a student at this level.

Stylistically, the entry shows some awkwardness, but not enough to interfere with the meaning. In researching and translating this recipe for flummery, a food item originally from Wales and very rarely encountered in the United States, this student demonstrated both a good intuitive sense for language learning and a disciplined approach to studying. Translating a recipe is an effective context for language instruction (Gambhir 1994-95, personal communication) since recipes generally contain the imperative mood, numbers and measurements, and a variety of ingredient names. By using a recipe for her submission, this student showed both an interest in the culture beyond the immediate classroom and a practical application of recently acquired knowledge. In other submissions, she translated a song by Enya and a short poem by Ursula K. LeGuin, going far beyond the requirements of the assignment as given.

PROS AND CONS OF JOURNAL WRITING IN IRISH CLASS

Journal writing clearly benefits students in that it enables them to apply and experiment with learned structures in a non-graded context. The journal writing experience should be less stressful and more personally rewarding than the usual contexts in which students demonstrate their knowledge (graded homework, tests, oral performance). Results of a course evaluation which included questions on journal writing are given below and indicate a favorable response to the assignment; this course evaluation was administered by the instructor and is distinct from the University's standardized, computer-coded course evaluation.

The potential disadvantage is that the openness and flexibility of the assignment leads to a high rate of errors or Anglicisms. Correction of these may prove discouraging to students, unless overlaid with some form of praise. Older, non-traditional students frequently show greater difficulty in accepting criticism, because their level of competence in their first language is so high; these learners are often well educated professionals studying the language out of interest in their Irish-American heritage. Ironically, the older students, although they may apply themselves diligently, often have the greatest difficulty absorbing the Irish idiom; consequently, their journals tend to show the greatest amount of interference from English. Students of traditional college age are still used to having their output constantly evaluated and corrected. And, also ironically, they are usually more receptive to new thought patterns and modes of expression; in fact, in some of them, the process seems effortless. Consequently, most of their journals read well, despite straightforward grammar mistakes which may be due to carelessness, inadequate preparation, or overly ambitious structures.

A pedagogical disadvantage results from the assignment of a non-graded project. Some students took the instructions too casually and ignored the teacher's warning about using new verbs or complicated new structures. If such actions detracted from a grade for the journals, students might be more careful about following instructions. On the other hand, grading, especially grading based not just on the output but also on how well the instructions were followed, could transform the one individualized component of the class work into a more strictly monitored, rigidly assessed chore, defeating its very purpose.

An anonymous survey yielded the following assessment by students of the journal writing project. The survey consisted of statements with which students could agree or disagree, on a scale of 1 to 10, with "1" representing least agreement and "10" representing very strong agreement. In the review below, "5" is considered agreement, "8" and "9" are strong agreement, and "10" is very strong agreement:
"Writing journals was fun": 60% agreed, with 66% of these agreeing strongly.

"Writing journals was helpful": 90% agreed, with 44% of these agreeing strongly and 11% agreeing very strongly.

"Instructor's comments were helpful": with the exception of one student who did not respond to this statement, all agreed, with 60% agreeing strongly and 10% very strongly.

"Instructor's comments were encouraging": with the exception of one student who did not respond to this statement, all agreed, with 50% agreeing strongly and 10% very strongly.

"Journals were a positive means of creative expression": 90% agreed, with 40% agreeing strongly and 10% very strongly.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INSTRUCTORS CONSIDERING JOURNAL ASSIGNMENTS

1) Students should write about topics with which they are familiar and which they enjoy.

2) Students should avoid humor unless they are sure they can recreate the appropriate punchline or humorous effect.

3) Initially, students should emphasize nouns and adjectives in their selection of new vocabulary; they should avoid verbs unless they believe they can generate the correct conjugated forms.

4) Students should familiarize themselves with the abbreviations used in their dictionary and make sure they understand what part of speech is listed.

5) Students should double-check any word they find in the English-Irish section of the dictionary with the same word in the Irish-English section, being alert to any inconsistencies with their intended meaning. Further aids such as grammar handbooks, for both Irish and also for English, should also be consulted; most students observed in five years of teaching Irish at the University have little understanding of the standard English grammatical terms used to explain Irish grammar (such as "conditional," "mood," "predicate," "case," or "indefinite").

6) Students should be advised from the beginning that journal writing almost inevitably leads to technical errors as well as stylistic problems. They should be prepared to see these corrected and not be discouraged. They should be encouraged to work with recently learned grammatical forms. A balance must be struck between giving the students this one creative outlet and helping them choose material they can work with efficiently; instructors might want to require that the journals for the week must include examples of the new forms covered in class, such as the past tense, or genitive case. Students should also be cautioned not to use sentences with predicate subjects (such as "I am a doctor") until that material has been covered in class; unless forewarned, students will assume they can use "tá" for such constructions.

7) Teachers may want to experiment with the amount of feedback they provide, balancing their personal inclination with the students' needs. Current theories on the appropriate amount of teacher feedback for compositions in L1, L2, and foreign languages vary greatly. Opinions range from no feedback (assuming the students learn to identify their own mistakes and learn subconsciously from them) to thorough feedback on grammar, vocabulary, content and style. A reasonable compromise would be a) to correct basic grammar errors, to help ensure that they do not resurface, b) to improve vocabulary choice, explaining that sometimes the dictionary meanings are inadequate or that Irish idiom requires a different basic pattern, and c) to provide as much positive feedback as
possible on content, so as to encourage the student. Even a brief note such as “suimíúil” (“interesting”) or “greannmhar” (“humorous”) or acknowledging how challenging the composition must have been can counterbalance the discouragement students may feel at seeing many corrections. The time required to review journal entries varies tremendously according to the sophistication of the writer. The least time is required for works by students who follow the guidelines suggesting that they adhere to grammatical forms covered in class; these may take only a few minutes to review. Other students may be more creative and ambitious, or more careless, and thorough review of even a short passage full of mistakes and unnecessary or awkward anglicisms may take half an hour or more. A student in a different class from the one discussed here once asked for and received permission to submit as a journal entry a translation of a course description in her major field of study, constitutional theory; as one might expect, this required considerable attention not only to basic grammar and meaning but to the underlying implications of the words selected.

Teachers should carefully consider the time they can devote to reviewing the journals and what adjustments they can make to their workload. Journal writing is not a standard feature of second-language classes although its popularity as a pedagogical technique is growing. Therefore, it is unlikely that a university department would require teachers to include it; by including journals, teachers may in essence increase their workload by volunteering extra time beyond what is required of them.

In comparison to teachers of the world’s major languages, such as Spanish or French, teachers of less commonly taught languages generally have greater autonomy and consequently greater responsibility for the material they choose to cover. Teachers of less commonly taught languages may have greater flexibility in adjusting their syllabi to incorporate journals than teachers of major languages. In addition, although the journal writing experience can be valuable in any language, including one’s first language, journals can be especially helpful when there is little surrounding linguistic context available to students.

Students of major languages can usually access their target language through many ways outside of class: news broadcasts (through the SCOLA channel), entertainment (video rentals, ethnic radio programs), reading material such as daily newspapers, popular magazines, and novels, ethnic or regional restaurants, church services, and in, some cases, family gatherings. This is usually more difficult to achieve with less commonly taught languages, and in the case of Irish, it would be almost impossible to assign or even suggest to students that they rent an Irish-language film from their local video store or speak Irish with the servers at the nearest Irish pub. In such cases, journal writing may provide at least some opportunity to use the language outside the classroom.

8) Teachers may want to suggest topics which they feel students can competently manipulate instead of leaving the content completely open.

9) Some students may prefer to record their journal entries and submit them on cassette. This method has the advantage of also demonstrating the student’s pronunciation skills; however it makes quantitative assessment difficult and more time-consuming. This method was not used in the elementary Irish class but has been reported as successful by other instructors (Gambhir 1994-95, personal communication).

10) Teachers should obtain release forms from the students indicating that they understand that their work may be part of an analytic study, if this is intended.

Given the dearth of Irish language learning materials suitable for use in American classrooms, and the lack of interesting interactive tasks in those which do exist, teachers and students both may benefit from including journal writing in
the syllabus. With appropriate guidance to dictionary usage and reminders of grammatical boundaries, students can explore areas of personal or cultural interest while comfortably testing their grammar skills.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


An instructor, when asked to teach a modern language in a college or university, usually sets about teaching a standard variety of the language, that is, a variety of the language which is considered the dominant variety of a language which is not widely spoken, or else an important regional variety of a language which is spoken over a broad geographical area. Such varieties are usually closely tied to a written standard language, so that the vocabulary, grammatical system, and even the sound system of the spoken language are often reflected very directly in the written form of the language. The average speaker of the language may in fact play down any obvious differences between the spoken language and the written language, ascribing such differences to imperfect acquisition of the language. The codified, often idealized, written variety may thus come to be seen as "correct", "proper", or "educated" speech, while the spoken variety may be seen as "grammatically incorrect", "slovenly", "unpleasant" in its sounds, and characteristic of uneducated people. There may in fact be strong pressures on the instructor to adhere closely to the written standard, however idealized it may be, and however removed it may be from the speech of living people.

The problem is especially acute, perhaps, in the teaching of Modern Arabic. Here, very clearly, the instructor must carefully consider the needs of the students. Students