

## Developing Language Awareness in the Irish Language Classroom: A Case Study

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This study deals with awareness oriented instruction and is based on research in a class of twenty-one post primary students studying Irish. The learners self-report low integrative and instrumental motivational levels for learning Irish and have little prospect of outside-class meaningful exposure to the language. The first section of the paper analyses the language learning background and learning styles of the students and the learning strategies which they deploy in learning Irish are described. The study then focuses on the outcome of a number of pedagogical techniques designed to raise language awareness in the classroom. These include attention-focusing devices in areas of phonology, dialect, structure and lexis. The learning outcomes are described briefly with some conclusions for developing language awareness in the Irish language classroom.

### IRISH IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

The Irish language has a unique position in Irish schools, being compulsory at both primary and secondary levels. It is of course the first official language of the country and the mother tongue of a minority of our pupils (currently estimated at 5%). It is regarded as an important aspect of the cultural continuity and linguistic heritage of all Irish

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citizens, and its maintenance is espoused by a majority of the population (Ó Riagáin & Ó Glasáin 1984, 5). Recent surveys of public attitudes (CLAR, 1975; Ó Riagáin 1992) to the language demonstrate a large degree of support among the public for a policy of increasing the bilingual competency of the population. Its promotion through the educational system is seen therefore, as a significant part of a policy of reversing language shift towards various degrees of bilingualism. I have calculated that Irish students are exposed on average to 3,186 hours<sup>1</sup> of formal instruction in the language - excluding non-school contact hours eg. homework, attendance at all-Irish courses, private tuitions, etc.

The Irish language in education has however been long associated with problems of poor motivation and under-achievement. (Ó Laoire 1994). These problems may often begin in primary school. Research conducted by Harris (1984) shows, for example that one third of all primary students make minimal progress in Irish. This figure is borne out by research into students in post-primary schools by Ó Laoire (1982) and by Ó Fathaigh (1991) and by the high rate of failure among candidates of ordinary level as opposed to higher level Irish in the terminal examination, the Leaving Certificate. It is against this background of minimal progress and low self-efficacy expectations that this study took place.

### THE IRISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS AND LANGUAGE AWARENESS

The present syllabus for Irish in the lower secondary school for the terminal Junior Certificate examination, which is in place since 1992 is aimed primarily at helping learners achieve a communicative competence in the language. It was designed and structured largely in the functional/ notional mould. While the development of cultural awareness is mentioned, there is no explicit

reference to language awareness. Increasing importance, however, is attached to developing learners' knowledge of language use (Roinn Oideachais 1990).

The new syllabus for the Leaving Certificate examination does, however, refer explicitly to the importance of developing language awareness in the Irish language classroom. Increasing attention is being given by teachers and learners in the classroom, albeit belatedly, to the lexical and structural points of convergence and divergence that occur between L1, L2 and L3 (French, German or Spanish), with Irish typically being L2 or L1 in the Irish speech communities.

There is an entire component in the syllabus, *An Ghaeilge Timpeall Orainn (Irish all around us)* that is so designed to raise learners' awareness of the role of the language in contemporary Irish society and which aims to help them achieve an integrative understanding of Irish culture.

### OBJECTIVES

In the absence of any research to date on language awareness in the Irish language classroom, the primary aim of this study was to determine how aware the students were of the salient differences between Irish, English and L3 (French in this instance), to determine the nature of their noticing capacity, as well as to gain an insight into how such awareness once developed, would influence their *learning styles* and/ or affect motivation. This approach was inspired by Schmidt's (1990) theory of intake facilitation which underlines the cognitive skill of comparison and noticing as a basic operation in the acquisition of L2, and the study also sought to adapt some of the strategies outlined in McCarthy's (1994) framework for developing language awareness in the primary school.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this short study were 21 first year post-primary students attending an all boys academic secondary school during the Spring term 1996. The school has mainly an urban (population 15,000 + ) catchment area with a significant enrolment from the rural hinterland. While there appears to be a policy of non-streaming, the students are nonetheless categorised for instructional purposes according to the choice of subjects they make. I observed a pattern over the many years that I worked in this school in which students who select construction technology subjects on entrance, are more likely to be low achievers or inefficient learners in Irish and modern languages. Such students are traditionally assigned to the A class. The majority of students assigned to this class grouping (as a result of subject choice) over the years would generally opt for ordinary level Irish in the Junior Certificate examination.

The students, whose average age was 13, had all resided since birth in the Republic of Ireland and had had nine years exposure (on average 2493.3 hours formal instruction) to the language. Few of them had any outside-class exposure to Irish with only 9.5 % (2) of them stating that they had ever spent time in the *Gaeltacht* or indigenous Irish-language speech communities. Mostly all (17/21), 80.9%, reported that one or more members of the family knew Irish. A pre-questionnaire item had asked if any member of their families actually used Irish in daily communication. All learners reported that the language was neither used in the home nor community domain and, for this reason, it was decided to reformulate the question to target the more amorphous concept of language knowledge. Most students reported that one or more members of their families knew or liked Irish. One student specified that his mother had studied all subjects through Irish at school, while another said that his father used certain Irish sentences in the army, while two students

stated that an older family member (a sister) liked the language.

### PROCEDURES

Two data collection instruments were used in this study. Firstly, the class was asked to respond in English to two pre-questionnaires in November and December of 1995 to gather data on the language learning backgrounds of the learners. Some of the questions asked, e.g. *Describe your background of language learning*, proved to be too complex for the learners. Many items in the questionnaire were reformulated as a result to avoid ambiguity, some were omitted, while many were clarified or simplified in more accessible, learner-friendly language. This pre-questionnaire, while undoubtedly provoking suspicion among the learners, helped nonetheless to focus their attention on themselves as learners and functioned, therefore, as an awareness-raising strategy.

Further questionnaires were administered in January 1996 and the results were analysed in an attempt to chart and describe the *language learning background* or language learning history of the learners. Data was kept in a teacher's diary, outlining the various strategies which were used in formal instruction to foster learners' sense of language awareness.

Second and third questionnaires extended the purpose of the first questionnaire by using retrospective interview-type questions to help identify the students' learning styles in response to LA awareness raising strategies to which they had been exposed in formal instruction classes. The data was meant to probe in greater depth the extent to which awareness-oriented instructional inputs might be internalised by learners in their own learning styles and thus affecting learned outcomes and/or motivation. A final part of the study comprised a think-aloud

recorded interview with the students to clarify certain responses that were given to the questionnaire.

The study would have benefited from longitudinal classroom observation, which would have detected the use of learning strategies and monitored the learning behaviour patterns of the students during the formal expository teaching inputs which focussed on developing awareness. It would also have lent a greater degree of objectivity to the study which, because I was the class teacher as well as researcher, may have been governed too much by personal input and by expected outcomes. However, I was unable to enlist the help of colleagues in the Irish department for this purpose due to the constraints of the timetable.

### LANGUAGE LEARNING BACKGROUND

With the dual purpose of testing the validity of the learners' responses in the later context of responding to awareness raising inputs and raising their awareness of their personal repertoire of learning strategies, (cognitive, metacognitive and/or social mediation), it was decided to describe to some extent the students' Irish language learning history. A very detailed pre-questionnaire was simplified to target such areas as affective response to the learning of the language and the learning of other languages (see Appendix A, 2.1), learners' perception of the differences in approaching the learning of Irish and F.L's (2.2/3), learners' self-evaluation of their ability in the language (2.4), as well as a recall of their experience of the language while at primary school (2.5). The responses were then collectively analysed.

### DISCUSSION

The vast majority of the learners reported to like learning Irish. Of these, one respondent who, at first had marked a *no* response, crossed it out to change it to *yes*. Many

students added the qualifier *it's o.k* to the yes which is deemed in student parlance to be an honest, if somewhat cliché positive response. When asked if they liked learning other languages, 28.5 % reported to dislike learning them. All these respondents, however, had reported liking the learning of Irish. Of the two students who responded negatively to learning Irish, one replied that he liked learning English but did not like learning L3 (in this case, French), whereas the other replied that he found all languages very difficult. Some of the other reasons given for liking language learning are worthy of mention here. One student specified that he enjoys studying other languages because studying English all the time would be boring. Another student said that he liked French especially even though the French teacher was always giving out to him!

The next question in Section 2 of the interview was designed to probe learners' perception of any difference in their approach to learning Irish as opposed to learning L3. Students were therefore asked to respond to this question:

- Is learning Irish different from learning other languages? How?

This was regarded as a significant question, as it was intended to identify and qualify learners' sense of comparative awareness and was further queried in the class interview at a later stage. It is perhaps significant that 80.4% of the subjects affirmed that they regarded learning Irish as being different from learning L3. The four students who replied that their approach to learning Irish was no different from approaching the study of L3 explained that studying all languages was basically the same, that other languages, ie French, were just as hard as Irish (from a respondent who did not enjoy the study of Irish and languages), that French was easier than Irish and significantly that French words resemble English words more than Irish words resembled English ones. The

subjects' responses as to how approaching the study of Irish differed from the study of other languages could be classified as follows:

- Concern about the quantity of material to be learned  
- *You have to learn more in Irish than in English* <sup>2</sup>
- References to different systems of syntax  
- *You have to turn the words around*
- References to different grammar systems  
- *because of so many rules*  
- *because of all the different verbs*  
- *it's hard with the past, present and future tenses very different to English*
- Difficulty factors  
- *it's harder sometimes*  
- *Irish is easier and different*  
- *because it's much harder*  
- *it's just as hard*
- Pronunciation variables  
- *because of pronunciation*  
- *the words are strange and pronounced strangely*
- The time differential  
- *because I have been studying it for 9 years*
- Differences in lexis  
- *the words are all different*  
- *French words resemble English more than Irish do*

It became apparent therefore, for learners in this class at least, that the *difficulty factor* was a major element in their perception of the differences they experienced going from L1 to L2. A class-interview was then recorded on tape where learners were invited to explain their responses. It transpired that many of them believe that they

should be more proficient in the language, having studied it for nine years. They were beginning to compare their competences to communicate in French after one term and draw unfavourable comparisons, stating that their competence in terms of being able to complete communicative tasks was only marginally behind competence at performing similar tasks in Irish.

When this response was correlated with their experiences of learning Irish at primary school - formulated in a brainstorming / recall open-ended question- What do you remember about learning Irish at primary school?; the predominant response (57.5%) focused on learning verbs. Verbs were mentioned in combination with a projector (9.5%), with nouns (4.7%), with *comhrá* (conversation) (4.7%), with spelling (4.7%) and with a teacher roaring in class! (4.7%). Other responses indicated that the dominant memories included writing out essays (9.5%), reading (4.7%), and an hour-long instruction (4.7%), and learning the months of the year (4.7%). These responses may underpin learner experience of exposure to formal instruction that focused very much on language form, grammar systems and cognitive approaches to learning, defined by Richards and Rodgers (1984, 60). "...a conscious attempt to organize materials around a grammatical syllabus."

For this reason it was decided to extend the study to determine the extent, if any, to which strategies which learners used were influenced by their experience of exposure to formal instruction of this kind, eg- it would be expected that a classroom emphasising grammatical structure might foster translation, etc.

### LEARNER STRATEGIES

In the pre-interview sessions, it was necessary to explain in some length to the students what exactly was meant by strategy. It was apparent that the students had never

consciously and systematically reflected on the nature of the learning process itself, or had never been trained in planning for learning or in monitoring the learning tasks. It was clear also that the evaluation of how well they had learned was generally seen as the responsibility of external agents (parents, peers, teachers).

The research here took cognisance of O' Malley and Chamot's (1990) work on strategies in second language acquisition. The questionnaire as a data collection instrument would determine strategy application based mainly on declarative knowledge. Such strategies that may have been proceduralised would not necessarily be recorded here. In such cases, the strategy may be deployed automatically and the student may not be aware of it. Thus, relatively automatic or instinctive procedures that the learners engaged in may not be isolated here.

Because Irish had rarely been used in communicative situations outside the classroom, learners did not have the external, real communication-situation to use as an evaluative yardstick by which they could realistically measure or infer the progress of their communicative ability in the language. It was clear that their sense of self-evaluation was informed by classroom performance and by school behaviour alone. There was no evidence from the class-interview transcript to suggest that they had reflected on how they interacted with the material to be learned or on how they manipulated or applied a specific technique to a learning task itself. Like school, during the weekends and holiday time, all that was best forgotten.

The class was nevertheless open and apparently excited in discussing their approach to learning and were eventually interested in responding to the following questions:

- How do you learn Irish?
- How do you learn new words in Irish?
- What do you do if you do not understand a word etc?

- Do you learn other languages in the same way?

It was found that most of the students showed similar patterns of learning strategies, with repetition being cited as the predominant method- ie (cited by 57.1%) repeating or reading over language items, vocabulary, verbs, a chunk of language until it was committed to memory. This method is thought to be commensurate with short-term recall either for fulfilling homework requirements or in preparation for an examination. In some cases learners specified that repetition amounted to an oral rehearsal activity.

- *I say the word over and over in my head*
- *I would go over it over and over again until I knew it*

For most learners, repetition of material to be learned involved writing it repeatedly:

- *I learn Irish by reading over words and then cover them up and keep trying to write them out*
- *I would basically do writing*
- *Keep writing it out until I knew it*
- *I learn Irish by trying to write it out and keep looking at it*

Silent reading as well as reading aloud were also mentioned by some students. Apart from the strategy of repetition that emerged as dominant, note-taking (14.2%) was mentioned in a sense different from writing and copying out the same material, although learners supplied no evidence that such note-taking might have involved conceptual processing of information. Translation was mentioned by two students:

- *I read and write and write down English beside the Irish, then learn it until it stays in my head*
- *I revise by writing it out and taking notes*

When questioned further about these activities during the class-interview, it emerged that students associated the learning of Irish with a private activity, as "something that happens when you do homework," rather than a social or school-based occurrence.

An interesting and unexpected finding here was the relatively high proportion of students (47.6%) who specified listening as a learning strategy: One particular student's response is worthy of note:

- *I study it and read out loud to see I am pronouncing the words properly. Any new words I hear, I always make a note of them and try to learn them off.*

In all, it appears that the learners reported to use six strategies: repetition, rehearsing orally, writing, note-taking, translation and listening when learning Irish. One student stated however: *I don't know how I do it!* These strategies could be classified as cognitive strategies in that they involve interacting with the material to be learned. The predominant strategy of repetition (ie imitating a language model including overt practice and silent rehearsal) is classified by O'Malley and Chamot (1990:119) as being a cognitive strategy, although it may not be regarded as being particularly cognitive in some contexts. Learning is seen by the learners as memorisation for short-term school-based purposeful recall. It is interesting to note here that learners' use of metacognitive strategies was less apparent to them, with the exception of two students who hinted at self-monitoring - checking accuracy of written production while it was taking place. Two student implied that they used a type of self-evaluation, by checking the outcome of

their written work (once memorised) against the standard version.

### LEARNING VOCABULARY

It was decided to gather data on how students learned new words in Irish for two reasons. It was found during the pre-trial questionnaire that this question was more focused than 3.1<sup>3</sup>, while secondly, it provided the opportunity to check if any further strategy would be listed, or if any discrepancy would emerge in the responses here when correlated with 3.1.

The responses here correlated very closely with the strategies outlined by learners in 3.1, except in the case of one learner who said that he would try to recall the word a few days later.

Only in the event of not understanding a word or experiencing difficulty did students show evidence of any social mediation strategy. Here, they showed themselves predominantly to be teacher-led. 90.4.% stated that they would simply ask the teacher. Of these, 14.2% replied that they would consult a dictionary or the teacher, 21% stated that they would ask a friend or fellow beside him or a relative or the teacher. One student said that he would ask the teacher if he were in a good mood! Another student did not specify, saying simply that he would ask someone, while another student said that he would leave the word alone. The study therefore had limited success in identifying learning strategies reported to be used by students in learning Irish vocabulary—mostly all appearing to underpin an over-reliance on teacher-directed initiation of the learning process, while perhaps indicating the need for instruction in the use of strategies to assist their learning.

When asked if they used the same strategies they had delineated in learning Irish in the case of L3 learning also, the data yielded that most learners do not use a different approach or strategy. The idea here was to isolate

any variable that was unique to learning Irish as well as to determine the extent of strategy transfer from L1 to L2 or from L2 to L3. 85.7% replied with an unqualified yes to the question: *Do you learn your new language(s) in the same way?* 9.5% replied negatively while one student did not answer the question. The study therefore may show the need to probe in greater detail the influence of learners' L2 (Irish) learning patterns on the acquisition of L3. It also shows that although students had perceived learning Irish to be significantly different from studying other languages, this seemingly did not alter their approach to learning it to any greater degree.

### DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AWARENESS

The final part of my study planned to illustrate the extent, if any, to which awareness-raising teaching inputs would affect learned outcomes, learning strategies or the dynamics of motivational behaviour. Given that the relationship between teaching and learning is an indirect and complex one, being affected by many intervening factors and variables, I did not of course assume a direct link between the instructional inputs and learned outcomes. The task was more to determine if awareness-oriented instructional measures would affect students' subjective experience of *noticing* as described by Schmidt (1993). This roughly defined is the ability to notice, or to avert to, target language features. While it is comprised of highly complex variables, it is my understanding that it is just as crucial as attentional capacity to the learning process. Harley (1994) states that an important and crucial function of instruction is to enable this experience to take place. The questions which I posed in the final part of the questionnaire were roughly meant to measure to what extent noticing difference between L1 and L2 had taken place following awareness raising instructional approaches based on a type of contrastive analysis.

It is necessary here to briefly describe these instructional inputs that I recorded in a teachers' diary from February to March 1996.

### AWARENESS-RAISING INSTRUCTIONAL INPUTS

The first approach used was an experiential approach where learners were invited first privately, and at a later stage in pairs, to write out the alphabet in Irish and to find letters in English that did not exist in Irish. As a follow-on activity, they were invited to discover sounds in Irish that had no equivalent in English and *vice versa*. This did not appear to be an appropriate activity to begin with, given the students' prior lengthy exposure to the language. The teacher diary for February 12 notes:

I am apprehensive if this is working. Derek K. remarked that this was a very childish activity, but when I asked him to tell me what he discovered, he said that he never really thought about the fact that there was no letter k in Irish. His neighbour asked me if a if a c was the same as a k. I wonder if I should tell them about the P and Q Celts? Colm C. asked if th was pronounced as h. Then Derek F. asked what the h was. This seems to interest them.

I think they are starting to notice things which they took for granted for so long, but I do not know where it's leading or what to do next.

In a later class input session, I tried to get the students to experience the differences in sounds between the various dialects. This illustration of contrasting sounds and lexical variables as naturally occurring in the dialects appeared to be an interesting activity for making students more aware or conscious of dialect itself and of sound variations. In my diary for February 23, I noted that the students were more interested in activities of this type than in their ordinary group-oriented communicative activities. I also expressed

apprehension as to how little of the target language I was using to develop this awareness.

I think the class is more at ease and more sure when we speak in English. They appear to be much more relaxed and obviously happier to volunteer and contribute. I worry that my private R & A study might be doing them little good.....

In a third formal awareness-raising activity, the affect of explaining the future tense in terms of contrast and comparison with English was investigated. Students were asked to write down 10 sentences in English, each containing the future tense and to compare their sentences to establish a common denominator. The word "will" or "I'll" was discovered after some difficulty.

When asked to reflect on what they had learned, some students said that they had never really thought seriously about this before. They were asked to write out 5 similar-type sentences in Irish. This misfired because not all the students (roughly half) were able to formulate sentences in the future tense. Those who had managed it successfully were asked to explain to those who had experienced difficulties until they very slowly noticed and discovered a common denominator. My teacher diary recorded that only one group out of five however were able to notice that the sound /ig/ (Munster Irish. /g/) or the ending /-idh/ was in all of them.

Later they were asked in groups to tell each other about their initial difficulties with identifying or formulating the future, and about how they had noticed the common ending. They were then invited to tell each other their plans for the rest of the evening and to dare each other to do certain things. So I heard- *téifidh mé* which had to be changed to its correct irregular *rachaidh mé* form,... *déanfaidh mé...goidfidh mé....ólfaidh mé* etc The frequency of using the future tense was increased for a two-three week period to produce an instructional intervention aimed



at promoting experiential noticing. The learners seemed to develop a dramatic ease and confidence in the use of the future in oral activities, but roughly about half failed to use the future accurately in a follow-up communicative type note writing exercise (accepting an invitation to a disco and arranging a date).

## FINDINGS

To measure the extent to which the students' learning styles may have been affected by the awareness raising instruction, the following three questions were asked at the end of the instruction period

- When the teacher made comparisons with English, what happened?

Further, learners were asked, once they were aware about a similarity or difference between L2 and L1, if this in fact facilitated the learning of L2 (given that the difficulty factor had emerged earlier as an aspect of which the students were generally aware).

- Once you knew about a similarity, or difference from, English, was Irish easier to learn
- What did you become aware of about Irish recently / this year?

The surprising finding of this study was that even though students appeared to be more engaged by the instructional strategies outlined and that their curiosity about the language had been stimulated, - a slight majority replied that these awareness raising teaching inputs did not in any way facilitate the learning of the language. 52.3% stated that when instructional focus was on the comparative aspects, nothing happened. The standard reply was: *No, it was just as hard as ever*. Another replied *No, it was hard*

*because I did not understand what he (the teacher) was saying*. Another still replied *Well, not really, because whatever you find out, it still stays the same*. It emerged, however, in follow-up class interview that the question, designed originally to simplify and make the processes of awareness more accessible to the students was too concrete and caused some confusion.<sup>4</sup> However, 47.7% stated that such a focus empowered and facilitated short-term learning. One student replied, for example:

*- It is different because the English and Irish are not said(sic) the same way. Irish changes the words around, and it made it easier to understand. ....you had to keep putting in fadas (sic) (accents)- but it made it easier*

It is clear to some extent that while deductive-type comparative activities did produce noticing, the study did not determine if this noticing affected the learned outcomes in any way. On the basis of a considerable number of responses, there may be some evidence to argue that noticing might in fact facilitate the learning process itself.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this short and limited study involved collaborative learning activities where a class of self-reported low-achievers reflected on the contrastive features of L1 and L2, in this case English and Irish. The limitations of such research are immediately apparent. The study was a small-scale exploration largely reliant on students' capacity for self-reporting. The subjects, in responding to me as their class teacher, may have given replies that they thought I might have wanted to hear and thus distorted expression of their real perception. As a teacher involved in this action research project, it was not always easy to distinguish real outcomes from expected outcomes and there was a tendency to try to control and take responsibility for the results. The study would have

benefited from greater objectivity in the data measuring instruments as well as from collaborative monitoring from colleagues. Furthermore, the data collection tools may have been inadequate in isolating learning strategies automatically used by learners that would evade declarative evaluation.

However, this study constitutes a beginning in research into this important constituent of Irish language classroom dynamics. As well as yielding limited descriptions for the first time of the learning backgrounds, styles and strategies in second-level schools in the Irish language classroom, it showed that for some of the learners, a process of noticing took place following awareness oriented instruction and as a result of the reflective activities which formed part of the study itself.

While a significantly high proportion of learners reported that this noticing process may have facilitated the learning of the language, further and more sophisticated analysis would be required to discover if the knowledge made explicit as a result of the collaborative and awareness-raising instruction feeds in any way into the implicit knowledge system of learners. The study provides a useful perspective on the short-term and wholly classroom-orientated language nature of language learning of some students.

An analysis of the strategies used tends to show that the learners at this stage appeared to associate language learning exclusively with the classroom. This experiment provides support for the view that awareness raising and reflective type activities can be helpful in the classroom and may be linked with the reversal from negative to empowering positive attitudes among learners. Above all, it is a small step in trying to achieve the "inside" perspective of learners - ie an awareness of their learning styles that they themselves report.

### Notes

1. Average of one hour daily - 290 days a year at primary school for 8 years=2,320 hours + average of 40 minutes for 5 years at post-primary level= (173.3)x5=866.5 hours = 3,186.5 hrs

<sup>2</sup>. Here and throughout the remainder of the paper, I reproduce some of the comments of the learners, thereby providing their "voice" in this study. In this particular case, the responses are presented in no particular quantitative or qualitative order of importance.

<sup>3</sup>. cf. Questionnaire. Appendix A

<sup>4</sup>. cf Appendix A. Section 4 .eg. cf 4.2 When the teacher made comparisons with English, what happened ?

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*Oifig na Gaeilge Labhartha  
Coláiste na hOllscoile, Gaillimh  
Éire*

## APPENDIX A : QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer these questions as fully and as honestly as you can.

### Part 1: Background Information

- 1.1 Age:
- 1.2. Number of years in school
- 1.3. Number of years living in Ireland
- 1.4. Number of years in post-primary school
- 1.5. Number of years studying Irish
- 1.6. Have you ever spent time in the *Gaeltacht* ?
- 1.7. Other languages studied/ you study
- 1.8. Does anybody in your family know or use Irish ?

### Part 2 : Learning Irish and French and /or English

- 2.1. Do you like learning Irish ?
- 2.2. Do you like learning other languages ?
- 2.3. Is learning Irish different from learning other languages ? Explain.
- 2.4. Would you say that you are good at Irish ?
- 2.5. What do you remember about learning Irish in primary school ?

### Part 3: Learning Irish. How do you do it ?

- 3.1. Do you find Irish easy or difficult ?
- 3.2. Did you always find it easy or difficult ?
- 3.3. What is the most difficult part of learning Irish ?
- 3.4. What is the easiest part ?
- 3.5. How do you learn Irish ?
- 3.6. How do you learn new words ?
- 3.7. What do you do if you do not understand a word etc. ?
- 3.8. Do you learn your other languages in the same

- way ?
- 3.9. Do you prefer the teacher to use Irish or English?
- 3.10. What do you enjoy most about learning Irish ?
- 3.11. What do you enjoy least about learning Irish ?

Part 4: What was it like ?

- 4.1. When you try to learn vocabulary, what happens ?
- 4.2. When the teacher made comparisons with English, what happened ?
- 4.3. What did you become aware of about Irish this year ?
- 4.4. Once you knew about a similarity or difference between Irish/ English/ French, was Irish any easier ? How ?
- 4.5 Give an example of something you learned and how you learned it.

## Teaching Forum

### Teaching Irish at Antioch College

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Two years ago I had the opportunity to first teach Irish for credit at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Ivan Dihoff, director of the language program there, explained that I was to teach Irish without using any written material. I was even to refrain writing on the blackboard, if at all possible. Since he was describing the immersion sort of sessions I experienced in Ceathrú Rua, I was more than happy to give it a try.

Many of the students are used to the method to begin with, (although by no means all are familiar with it) and that helps tremendously. But the most important aspect to it is, I think, that we are focusing solely on communicating with each other, not on language learning. Through Irish, we build a little community, finding out what our names are, where we are from, what our parents do, what goes on in school, and so on.

The students quickly get used to the artificial conventions the immersion forces upon our conversations. They progress surprisingly quickly. It is a method, however, that makes the instructor (*cainteoir mór*, rather) think fast on his feet. I have a number of props that I use to help out. These mainly consist of a small toy cow and sheep, a couple of Avon glass decanters shaped like cars, a plastic boat or two, and a couple of Smurfs (one in a kilt blowing on bagpipes). You can imagine the laughter they engender.

About half way through the quarter, when they begin requesting it, we do begin to write a bit on the board. At first it is simply a *seanfocal* or two that they might have learned that day. Eventually, as they get more used to the spelling conventions, I'll show them the ins and outs of some verb or noun constructions, and then use those