

## Preparing a Structural Syllabus for Adult Learners of Irish

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## Teacher Certification and Less Commonly Taught Languages<sup>1</sup>

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This article advocates certification of instructors of one particular less commonly taught language, Irish. Such certification would aid instructors to gain formal recognition in the teaching community. In 1994, the author carried out a small survey of students learning Irish in the New York City area. The results showed that students felt confident about their teachers' fluency and knowledge of grammar; however, many students were less satisfied with their instructors' teaching abilities. This article recommends that certification of Irish language instructors should focus on both language fluency and pedagogy.

It was recently mentioned in a New Jersey newspaper that we are beginning to see the "mainstreaming" of Irish language teaching in the United States (Llorente 1995, p. D6). This is a result of the fact that Irish, which was once only taught in the United States by interested individuals in their homes, churches, and clubs, is now becoming quite commonplace in adult schools and community colleges in states such as New Jersey (NJ). These continuing education programs offer a wide range of subjects and the coordinator may not necessarily be knowledgeable of the Irish language. One can be assured that it would be a great aid to such a coordinator to know that the instructor he or she is

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited form of a paper presented at the first annual NAACLT conference at Glendale Community College, California, on 25 March 1995.

considering engaging to teach Irish is indeed qualified. It could be said that the stage has now been reached in North America where certification of Irish language teachers would benefit students and the state of the language in general.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION OF THE ISSUE

The question of certification of teachers in any language, be it a less commonly taught language (LCTL) or one of the traditionally taught languages of North American secondary schools, has caused some controversy. Certifying agencies are posed with the task of not only certifying fluency or proficiency, but also teaching abilities. Certification requirements have ranged from possessing a degree in the given language to having a native speaker vouch for one's fluency. Due to this lack of consistency, some foreign language professional organizations have begun to develop their own standardized forms of testing qualified teachers.

In this article, it will be argued that although proficiency skills are extremely important, other factors must be considered when certifying foreign language teachers. Based on data collected from a number of sources, it seems, in the case of teaching Irish, that considerable attention needs to be given to teaching skills. The certifying of any individual would therefore need to include an evaluation of a prospective instructor's teaching skills as well as some form of a language proficiency test.

The goals of certification in the case of Irish would be to ensure that students receive quality instruction and to encourage instructors to further develop approaches to aiding students in the language learning process while improving their fluency and accuracy when speaking and writing the language. As the number of advanced students increases in the United States, the need for better-qualified teachers becomes evident. Better-qualified instructors will raise the image of both the teaching profession and the language in general.

TESOL, an international association for English language teachers, is currently considering becoming involved in the certifying process. Perhaps there is something that can be learned from their current debate. The points listed in favor of creating a certification program include raising "the professional status of ESL/EFL [English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language] instructors," establishing "an international norm for the profession," fostering "effective ESL/EFL instruction," and promoting "continued professional development" (Christopher 1994, p. 15).

In most primary and secondary schools in the United States, teachers are considered qualified to teach a foreign language when they have completed an undergraduate degree in that language. One would expect a high school French teacher to have had a degree in French. Most institutions of higher education would also expect a candidate to have a master's degree to teach at least part-time. Individual states also administer examinations in the common foreign languages to confirm the ability of a given individual to teach one or more of these languages. This form of certification is especially used for primary and secondary teachers.

Two other sources of certification are widely used outside of the area of local government funded education and third level institutions in general. The first source can be found at some cultural centers. These centers are often funded by foreign governments and offer language classes. Examples include the British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe-Institut, and Instituto Cultural Español. Language proficiency certificates can be obtained from most of these centers. Professional associations are another source. British Columbia Teachers of English as an Additional Language (BC TEAL) is one such organization. They recognize four levels of teacher certification. As in the case of Irish, many ESL/EFL instructors work outside of the traditional primary, secondary, and tertiary education system (Christopher 1994, p. 15).

## PARTICULAR CASE OF IRISH

How does the Irish language in the United States compare to these examples? Few Irish language teachers in North America are native speakers. Even fewer have a bachelor's degree (not to speak of master's) in Irish. However a very small percentage do have degrees in Celtic Studies, Irish Studies, or applied linguistics (with interests in second language acquisition and with Irish as the language of research). There is no proficiency test on the part of federal or state governments for examining Irish language skills.

The Irish Department of Education does administer An Ceard-Teastas Gaeilge; however, it is only given in Ireland and is not intended for those teaching Irish as a foreign language<sup>2</sup>. Ireland does not have any cultural institutes in American cities, as does the French government, for example. Lastly the author is not aware of any professional organization which provides testing for the certification of Celtic language teachers<sup>3</sup>.

One may ask, is certification really a need? Although the teaching of Irish in New Jersey for example started out as a grassroots movement, it is becoming increasingly institutionalized. I attended my first classes in a Jersey City (NJ) home. I also taught my first class in a New Milford (NJ) kitchen. However the number of colleges offering Irish in New Jersey has gone from one in 1989 to eight in 1997. Although most of these course offerings are not part of a degree program, a few colleges in the NJ/NY area, including my own, now offer Irish as a credit-bearing foreign language undergraduate course. At Bergen Community College (NJ), Irish was first added in the spring of 1995 as a continuing education class. It was not thought necessary to put a limit on the number of students that could register. However, before long, thirty-four students had paid fees for Elementary Irish. And after closing the class a week before the end of registration, many individuals had to be refused places. The following semester, autumn 1995, both beginning and

intermediate levels ran with a sufficient number of students. Currently four levels of Irish are being offered at Bergen Community College. As course offerings grew, an additional instructor had to be found. The individual in charge of hiring needed to find someone who was "qualified." However, what does qualified in this case mean: the Ceard-Teastas, a diploma in Irish, a bachelor's in Irish, a master's in Irish, or native language proficiency? Or perhaps a *fáinne* (to demonstrate Irish language proficiency) with a degree in applied linguistics (specifically, a focus on second language acquisition) or perhaps a degree in any other language would do<sup>4</sup>? There are many individuals who do not have any of these qualifications, but are excellent Irish language teachers. Certification would enable these non-degreed teachers to be recognized and bring greater credibility to adult and continuing education programs. It may also enable those with a master's degree in related fields to teach Irish in American universities<sup>5</sup>.

## SURVEY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the autumn of 1994, I administered a questionnaire to 28 students of Irish. Fourteen were attending an Irish language immersion weekend in Esopus, New York (NY), six were newly enrolled students at Bergen Community College who had previously studied somewhere else, and eight were attending an Irish language religious service at St. Peter's College (NJ). Although this sample is smaller than that of my 1990 effort which included 109 students of Irish (Ihde 1994, pp. 80-84), it is felt that some direction can be established for future studies in this area by analyzing these data. To show the variety of experiences respondents came from, it can be noted that five of them attended classes in the homes of their instructors, seven of them took classes at community centers and one at a monastery, five participated in an adult program at a middle school and two in a high school, four took classes at community colleges, and three at four-year colleges. One participant did not answer the question. Respondents were

provided with twenty statements referring to their last regular Irish teacher. By use of a 6-point Likert scale, they were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements:

The question of language ability did not seem to be a problem. Students had great confidence in their teacher's oral and grammatical skills. Twenty-seven of the students claimed that their teachers were fluent in Irish. Twenty-one of these chose "strongly agree" for the statement that their instructor was fluent in Irish. Only one student disagreed. The average score on the Likert scale for this point was a 5.57 and the standard deviation from the mean was the second lowest of the twenty questions at 0.82. The only area with equal point rating and lower deviation was the statement "My instructor conveys to me a positive image of the Irish language." When it came to evaluating their instructor's knowledge of Irish grammar, the opinion was almost as strong with a mean of 5.125 and a standard deviation of 0.96. Standard deviation is "a rough measure of the average amount by which observations deviate from their mean" (Witte 1989, p 498). The lower the deviation, the greater the agreement among respondents was.

What did seem to be a major issue with the respondents was teaching skills. In the teaching of listening, only thirteen students, less than half, agreed that their instructor ever used tape recordings of other Irish speakers. In the teaching of speaking and writing, students did not strongly agree with the statement that claimed teachers enabled their students to practice language skills during class time. The mean for this statement was 4.8 and the standard deviation from the mean was 1.34, showing a variety of answers. In fact five students actually disagreed with this statement. In the teaching of reading, sixteen respondents, more than half, claimed that their instructor did not use any material from Irish language newspapers or magazines. By and large, students reported that their instructors did not evaluate their progress. Also students did not strongly agree

after completing a series of classes with their instructor that their Irish had improved (mean 4.89, STD 1.4).

Instructors also did not fare so well in the areas of planning and individual aid. Students on the average only "somewhat" agreed that their instructors set realistic goals for them with eight students disagreeing outright. They also only "somewhat" agreed that they could look to their teacher for individual help. The mean here was 4.39 with a standard deviation of 1.45.

So it seems that although the students of this sample think their teachers are excellent speakers of the language, there appears to be some disagreement as to their teachers' ability to teach.

## CONCLUSION

Although the number of participants in this survey was fairly small, twenty-eight, I believe the message is a valid one. Two areas of concern exist. Many Irish language teachers need to improve on their communicative and grammatical abilities. Students (largely non-fluent speakers) are not necessarily the best judges of their teachers' fluency. However this could be easily tested by an association or government agency, though the former is more likely. Yet, the area in North America that needs the most development is teacher training. Being a native or fluent speaker of the language is not always sufficient. Any certification proposed therefore should be more than just a test of Irish language proficiency; it should also include teaching skills. Of course these would be difficult to define due to the variety of schools of thought that exist on foreign language teaching. However such training has already gotten underway with strongly attended teacher workshops sponsored by An Teanga Mharthanach (NJ), Daltai na Gaeilge (NY, in co-operation with Oideas Gael, Donegal), and NAACLT (PA & Nova Scotia).

The NAACLT workshops (1996 & 1997) have addressed the needs of Scottish Gaelic and Welsh instructors

in addition to Irish language teachers. Topics covered at some of these teacher workshops have included general lectures on language acquisition, learning strategies and methodology, use of technology, and language learning materials. The selection of topics, I believe, arises from two fundamental needs among less commonly taught language (LCTL) instructors in North America. First, there appears to be a need for general language teaching training. Many of our Irish language teachers in North America were not trained in the field of education. Some part-time instructors earn their full-time living in the fields of law, medicine, engineering, or agriculture, for example. Others are raising families full-time. This need differs little from that of individuals wishing to tutor students in Spanish or French. Secondly, there appears to be a specific need for LCTL instructors to aid them in gathering and developing materials for use in the classroom. As a result of the status of many of the Celtic languages, the accumulation of authentic materials for use in the classroom can be a challenging proposition for the beginning teacher. Also the selection of textbooks for LCTLs is extremely limited in most cases.

Hence, the training and certification needs of LCTL teachers is a consideration which can draw from the experiences of more commonly taught languages such as ESL, French, and Spanish; however, many of the challenges facing the learning of less commonly taught languages are unique to these languages including material selection, for example. It is hoped as NAACLT, *Daltaí na Gaeilge*, *An Teanga Mharthanach*, *Oideas Gael*, and other public and private institutions focus on these needs, that the teaching and learning of some less commonly taught languages, specifically the Celtic languages, may become a more rewarding and fulfilling experience for our students. However, it would be beneficial for LCTL instructors to learn from one and other as they struggle to improve language learning experiences. Opportunities to exchange ideas among instructors on discussion lists such as CELTIC-T and LCTL-T<sup>7</sup> are opportunities for growth in this area.

It appears the time has come for teaching certification of some LCTLs. This article proposes that for Irish, this need is one that should be currently explored. However, there is no point in setting standards if language teachers do not have access to training that will address areas needing development. Workshops and Internet discussion lists are two ways this article recommends for preparing instructors for the eventual certification process.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their many insightful comments and particularly for the information contained in the following footnote.

<sup>2</sup> See An Roinn Oideachais, 1986. The Irish Department of Education also has the TTG or *An Teastas i dTeagasc na Gaeilge*, a three week intensive methodology course given in the summer; however, opportunities in the past were not extended to Irish language teachers abroad to attend this training.

<sup>3</sup> Since presenting this paper in 1995, I have been invited by *Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann* to provide input on their project to develop Irish-as-a-Foreign-Language tests. These tests, part of the general ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) project, are to evaluate students' proficiency (at the waystage and threshold levels) and not necessarily that of teachers.

<sup>4</sup> The reference here to "any other language" implies that a trained instructor of French who is fluent in Irish may be able to transfer her general knowledge of the language learning process in the teaching of French to the new situation of teaching Irish. Unfortunately many B.A. or M.A. programs in modern languages are literature based and have little to offer in terms of methodology and materials development for the second language teacher.

<sup>5</sup> At some American third level institutions, undergraduate students must complete two or more semesters of a foreign language regardless of their specialization. In a very small number of universities/colleges, the Irish language will satisfy this requirement. See Ihde (1996, pp. 181-186).

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that a larger sample would show if the trends reported here are caused by a few individual learners or are representative of the actual population. Part of the difficulty in

finding such a representative sample is that the actual population is quite small.

<sup>7</sup> One can join these lists by sending the following message to listserv@tc.umn.edu sub celtic-t <yourfirstname> <yourlastname>

Replace "celtic-t" with "lctl-t" to subscribe to the more general list. For more current information, see <http://carla.acad.umn.edu/LCTL/LCTL.HTML>

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## Constructing a Gaelic Dictionary for Children: some phonological and orthographic considerations

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The substance of this paper was generated by a research project I was commissioned to carry out on behalf of the Primary Review Group on Gaelic Education (PRG), which has powers to disburse specific grants from the Scottish Office Education Department designed to provide for Gaelic in education. The efficiency of this system is the subject of a current research project of mine and will doubtless bear fruit in further papers. In 1994, the PRG viewed my findings on the present level of dictionary provision in Gaelic and then asked me to compile a basic Gaelic-Gaelic dictionary for children to use in their Primary School classrooms. There were many difficulties in this task, some of them foreseen, others unforeseen. I mean to outline two of these difficulties here in the hope that anyone facing the task of writing a monolingual dictionary for a minority language in future may thus be forewarned if not forearmed.

Scottish Gaelic is a minority language which has not always been so, which means that it now has a relatively large demographic spread considering the number of speakers of the language. The 1991 census recorded that there were under sixty six thousand people in Scotland who considered themselves to be Gaelic speakers. There is no need to enter into an analysis of whether the majority of these people are fluent speakers or are people with a prejudiced view of their ability to speak Gaelic or else are people with specific political agendas which involve cultural and linguistic goals. The fact remains that sixty-six