

Teaching Forum

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THE TEACHER NEEDS A TEACHER?

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Language enthusiasts are eager to spread the knowledge of a language whenever possible, but in some areas there is a lack of qualified teachers. In such cases, the choice is between lessons from an under qualified teacher or no lessons at all.

Thomas W. Ihde's article in the *Journal of Celtic Language Learning* (Ihde 1997: 41) raises the issue of the competence of Celtic language teachers in terms of both language fluency and pedagogy. It is a healthy sign indeed, if Celtic language instruction has been elevated from the status of living-room lessons to that of a demand for certification. In addition, as Professor Ihde cogently noted, "Better-qualified instructors will raise the image of both the teaching profession and the language in general." This argument is given further support by the knowledge that lack of teacher competence is believed to have been a contributing factor in the decline of the Irish language in Ireland (Hindley, 1990 : 206). With those factors in mind, I would like to report on my situation as an Irish language teacher because it may carry implications beyond my personal concerns.

Like Professor Ihde, I am a faculty member at a state college in New Jersey; I also teach Irish language classes at an adult education program nearby. Unlike Professor Ihde, however, I consider myself to be one of those teachers whose Irish fluency falls short of the standards that certification would guarantee. (Also, unlike Professor Ihde, I

have not done the enormous amount of work he has done to promote Celtic languages.) The problem is double-edged.

I teach Irish at the Princeton Adult school, which operates at the public high school and is not affiliated with Princeton University. My students are working people who live too far south of New York and too far north of Philadelphia to avail of language classes in those cities. In addition, factors of location, time, family concerns, etc. make the classes offered by Brookdale Community College in conjunction with *Daltaí na Gaeilge* difficult for them to attend, even though Brookdale offers a comprehensive program that no individual could ever match. The Princeton location is ideal for my students, but I have been unable to find any teachers for whom the location is in any way convenient. To put it plainly: if I don't teach these students, no one else will.

When class began, it was so well subscribed that Princeton Adult School literally had to turn people away. Although I have experienced the dropout rate typical of an adult-education program, there is still a dedicated, enthusiastic core of people attending each week, even to the point of agreeing to meet informally when the school year concludes. We have established a good rapport, but I sometimes feel that my students are not being served as well as they might be. Students such as these, who are at the forefront of language acquisition in a given geographic area, are ideal candidates to become teachers themselves as interest spreads; but, once again, a chief concern is that their fluency level will not be equal to the task of providing their students with a solid grounding in the Irish language.

The other side of the problem is that, although I am more than willing (eager, in fact) to improve my fluency, a host of personal factors, not the least of which is my candidacy for the Ph.D. in English Literature at The Catholic University of America, precludes my attending classes either in the United States or Ireland. The alternatives seem to be two equally unattractive possibilities. One is to continue to give interested students lessons from an inferior teacher. The other is to refrain from offering any classes until a more

qualified teacher arrives -- a solution that leaves open the possibility that student interest will wither in the intervening time, which could be years. Our only choice until we have reached the ideal state, I believe, is to continue to stoke interest in Celtic languages by whatever means we have at our disposal. Even substandard instruction is preferable to allowing interested people to go wanting for Celtic language knowledge. Granted, this view may not be shared by all.

Some enthusiasts would prefer that a language not be spoken at all rather than be spoken badly. The problem with this view in terms of adult school learners is that they do not intend to become so accomplished in a language that they can move into a native-fluency setting. They would like to learn a little more about their heritage, they want to know the (approximate) pronunciation and meaning of the occasional word they see in an English text, or, in some cases, they just want to hear again some of the phrases they remember hearing their grandparents or parents speaking. In fact, my class has unanimously adopted the maxim "Is fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste" -- (Broken Irish is better than clever English.) With these factors in mind, I see no choice but to continue offering lessons to the students who are interested in them, even if the level of instruction falls short of the ideal. Surely this approach can hardly do any more damage to a language than something like internecine squabbling among the cognoscenti about which is the "true" dialect.

REFERENCES

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- Ihde, Thomas W., 1997: Teacher Certification and Less Commonly Taught Languages, *Journal of Celtic Language Learning*, pp. 41-50.

TAKING THE 'ACHING' OUT OF 'TEACHING': FUN AND GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

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When teaching languages it is important to remember the role of play in language acquisition. As adults, we often marvel at the ease with which children are able to learn things that cost us such effort and pain. Indeed, they learn without even being aware of what they are doing, if the 'real work' is couched in games or entertaining programs of one kind or another. The element of 'distraction' can be of great benefit. I resolved to bear this in mind when teaching Gaelic to adults on Sabhal Mòr Ostaig's summer short courses.

Having taught students of all ages (from pre-school to post-retirement), I have found that any and all (with the possible exception of 14-year-olds!) are willing to experiment with game-playing and role-playing in the classroom. Thus, I produced week-long courses which were based almost entirely on 'distraction' methods. Many of the games were drawn from language courses I had attended, read about or heard about, while a few were entirely my own work. The examples below are chosen at random from my collection, but they illustrate the diversity in the types of games that can be employed as well as the range of uses they can be put to.

The exercise I used as an 'ice-breaker' was one which involved all of the students getting out of their chairs and moving around the room. After a short preparatory session, I went around the class placing stickers on the backs of the students. The stickers had the names of animals (or, in another version of the game I used, famous people), and the purpose of the game was for the students to find out which animal 'they were' by asking questions of their colleagues. The format is no doubt fairly familiar, but the effect on the