

## 'Cad a deir tú leis na hÉireannaigh?'- Teaching Scottish Gaelic to Irish Speakers

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This article establishes why speakers of Irish might experience specific challenges, quite different from those students with no background in another Gaelic language, when learning Scottish Gaelic. The author then introduces a number of practical methods, which have been used to successfully address these challenges, and also suggests a number of teaching aids, which might be useful in this context.

In the past years, Scottish Gaelic language classes have become increasingly popular both within and outside of universities. These classes tend to be directed at people whose native language is English and who have no previous knowledge of a Celtic language. The standard teaching materials, such as *Cothrom Ionnsachaidh*<sup>2</sup>, *Teach Yourself Gaelic*<sup>3</sup>, *Scottish Gaelic in Three Months*<sup>4</sup>, or *Speaking Our Language*<sup>5</sup>, are written with the same type of learner in mind. While this no doubt reflects the linguistic background of the majority of people interested in learning Scottish Gaelic, it by no means constitutes the whole picture. For example, there is little material for native speakers of the language, of any age-group, wishing to acquire literacy or an increased linguistic ability. Nor is there much provision for those attending one of the Gaelic-medium units at primary and secondary schools all over Scotland<sup>6</sup>. I am going to address here the situation as presented by another group wishing

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on a lecture delivered at *Rannachadh na Gàidhlig 2*, Glasgow University, 31.7.-2.8. 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Black, *Cothrom Ionnsachaidh* (Peebles 1984, 8<sup>th</sup> repr. 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Boyd Robertson, Iain Taylor, *Gaelic, a Complete Course for Beginners*, Teach Yourself Series (London, Chicago 1993).

<sup>4</sup>Ruibéard Ó Maolalaigh, *Scottish Gaelic in Three Months*, Hugo's Language Books (Woodbridge 1996).

<sup>5</sup>Richard Cox et al., *Speaking our Language Series 1-4* (Isle of Skye 1993-6).

to acquire Scottish Gaelic, those with a prior knowledge of Irish. Not least through the work of *Iomairt Chòlm Cille*<sup>7</sup>, a cultural institution created in 1997 to improve cultural interaction and exchange between Ireland and Scotland, there has been a rise in interest by Gaels from Ireland in their neighbours in Scotland. This is demonstrated for example by the language courses offered by *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, now part of the University of the Highlands and Islands, each summer, some of which are specially geared towards people with Irish<sup>8</sup>.

I teach Scottish Gaelic in the School of Irish at NUI Galway, a university on the West-coast of Ireland. Here, Scottish Gaelic is a module within the degree courses in Modern Irish and in Celtic Studies. It is further envisaged to include the language into the recently established Celtic Civilisation degree. The students attending my classes come from a number of backgrounds: A number of them would have attended Irish-medium schools, while others studied Irish as a subject at school. (Since Ireland follows an Irish-English bilingual policy, Irish is part of the curriculum from the first year through to the final year.) A certain percentage of native speakers of Irish are also my students. Due to their different credentials, the students' standard of Irish, both spoken and written, varies greatly. Nevertheless, since all teaching at the School of Irish is done through the medium of Irish, a certain level of Irish is expected and necessary for each student to successfully perform in their studies. In theory, this would also include some familiarity with relevant grammatical terminology and how it applies to the Irish language, as well as the ability to understand the fundamental grammatical features of a modern Q-Celtic language in general. However, in practise many students only have a rudimentary grasp of grammatical concepts. This includes the native speakers of Irish, who frequently lack the theoretical understanding of how their native language is constructed.

The familiarity of my students with Irish does mean that they do not need the same amount of explanation and practise as regards certain specific grammatical features when learning Scottish Gaelic as students who have no prior knowledge of Irish might do. The rea-

<sup>6</sup>Nevertheless, this is probably the area with most support, as demonstrated by the government-funded *Stòrlann Nàiseanta na Gàidhlig* (<http://www.storlann.co.uk>), which was set up in 1999 to co-ordinate and distribute teaching materials in and for Scottish Gaelic.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.colmcille.net/>

<sup>8</sup>For information on the courses, see <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/smo/cg/>

son for this are of course the (overrated, as many of my students claim) similarities between Irish and Scottish Gaelic. It is unnecessary to include at this point a detailed account of these characteristics, which mark the two languages as members of the Q-Celtic branch of languages, also known as the Gaelic languages. Suffice it to briefly point out here some of the more striking features, from a teacher's point of view;<sup>9</sup> other details will be discussed where they are pertinent to the argument.

Both languages agree as regards the basic distinction of the two forms of the verb 'to be', as well as the conjugated forms of both verbs, the use and form of prepositional pronouns, the way questions are asked and answered and the use of the verbal noun. Added to this can be a significant semblance in vocabulary and basic phonology. Hence, any student with a previous knowledge of Irish is already familiar with many features of Scottish Gaelic, which someone entirely new to Gaelic languages would need to be taught first, before even a basic understanding of the language would be possible.

Let me demonstrate this by a couple of examples. Prepositional pronouns, a characteristic feature of Celtic languages in general, agree in Irish and Scottish Gaelic to an extent that the biggest challenge is not to remember the pronouns themselves, but rather, how

Irish	Scottish Gaelic
agam	agam
agat	agad
aige/aici	aige/aice
againn	againn
agaibh	agaibh
acu	aca

<sup>9</sup> Since this article is based on my personal experience as a teacher, my goal is not to present an exhaustive picture of potential challenges and I included here only those features which cause my own students most difficulties. Other teachers might find that the difficulties of their own students vary from that.

to keep the two slightly different forms in each language apart. Another example are simple questions and answers:

Irish	Scottish Gaelic	English
Cá bhfuil tú ag dul?	Càite bheil thu a' dol?	Where are you going?
An bhfuil tú ag dul abhaile?	Am bheil thu a' dol dhachaidh?	Are you going home?
Tá, tá mé ag dul abhaile.	Tha, tha mi a' dol dhachaidh.	Yes, I am going home.

From these examples, it should already be obvious why one of the biggest challenges facing my Irish students when learning Scottish Gaelic is to keep the two languages apart (particularly in the case of non-native speakers). Given this situation, it is obvious why a different approach to teaching is needed than that presented by any existing Scottish Gaelic text books and other teaching aids.

Maybe the most obvious method is to employ tables in which certain features of the two languages are placed side by side, complemented by word-lists contrasting the most common words from each language, with particular emphasis on 'false friends'. Examples might include the following:<sup>10</sup>

#### Vocabulary

Scottish Gaelic	Irish	English
cuideachd	freisin	also
oilthigh	ollscoil	university
cànan	teanga	language
cudthromach	tábhachtach	important
ionnsachadh	foghlaim	learning
toilichte	sásta	happy

<sup>10</sup> See here also the lists included on the *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig* webpages on <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/ga-ge/>, from which some of the information included here is gleaned.

## Spelling

Irish (Ir.)	Scottish Gaelic
saol	saoghal
croí	críde
bia	biadh
go	gu
liom	leam
ar	air

## Grammar

	Irish		Scottish Gaelic	
<b>Present Tense</b> <i>independent</i>	táim (tá mé) tá tú tá sé, sí	táimid tá sibh tá siad	tha mi tha thu tha e/i	tha sinn tha sibh tha iad
<i>dependent</i>	nílim (níl mé) níl tú níl sé/sí	nílimid níl sibh níl siad	chan eil mi chan eil thu chan eil e/i	chan eil sinn chan eil sibh chan eil iad
<b>Past Tense</b> <i>independent</i>	bhí mé bhí tú bhí sé/sí	bhíomar bhí sibh bhí siad	bha mi bha thu bha e/i	bha sinn bha sibh bha iad
<i>dependent</i>	ní raibh mé ní raibh tú ní raibh sé/sí	ní rabhamar ní raibh sibh ní raibh siad	cha robh mi cha robh thu cha robh e/i	cha robh sinn cha robh sibh cha robh iad
<b>Future Tense</b> <i>independent</i>	beidh mé beidh tú beidh sé/sí	beimid beidh sibh beidh siad	bidh mi bidh thu bidh e/i	bidh sinn bidh sibh bidh iad
<i>dependent</i>	ní bheidh mé ní bheidh tú ní bheidh sé/sí	ní bheimid ní bheidh sibh ní bheidh siad	cha bhídh mi cha bhídh thu cha bhídh e/i	cha bhídh sinn cha bhídh sibh cha bhídh iad

## False Friends

	Irish (Ir.)	Scottish Gaelic (SG)
idir	'between' [~ SG <i>eadar</i> ]	'at all' [~ Ir. <i>ar chor ar bith</i> ]
gaol	'relation' [~ SG <i>ceangal</i> ]	'love' [~ Ir. <i>grá</i> ]
cách/càch	'everyone' [~ SG <i>a h-uile duine</i> ]	'the rest' [~ Ir. <i>na daoine eile</i> ]

This approach, which looks at how Scottish Gaelic compares to Irish, is probably most useful for linguists, who are mainly interested in gaining an abstract, passive knowledge of the language, or as a reference for those already familiar with one of the two languages. However, on their own, these tables will do little to produce a speaker of Scottish Gaelic, no matter how good their Irish, since no provision is made for active learning. Without student involvement, either through oral participation or practical exercises, in order to apply, practice and recall the material learnt, it is unlikely that any student will gain the proficiency and confidence to become an active speaker of the language.

I would even go as far as to say that this method treats Scottish Gaelic as an appendix to or a dialect of Irish, rather than as a language in its own right and might remove the incentive to learn the language on a future occasion to any level of competency<sup>11</sup>. For all those reasons, I would like to propose here a different method when teaching Scottish Gaelic to Irish speakers.

To begin with, the students' previous knowledge of Scottish Gaelic and why they are interested in learning it should be considered. This helps pitch the level on which the teaching will set in and also aids in choosing subject areas that will most likely engage and maintain the students' interest throughout the course. My students tend to have some experience of Scottish Gaelic through *Raidió na Gaeltachta* (the Irish-language radio), which broadcasts some programmes in collaboration with *Radio nan Gaidheal* (the Scottish Gaelic-language radio) or through television programmes such as

<sup>11</sup> While the speaking of a language should always form an important part of teaching it, I would oppose the removal of grammatical and phonological explanations and exercises, since this would hardly produce competent and confident speakers.

the Scottish Gaelic soap-opera *Machair*, which was shown in Ireland with subtitles. The students report that they were able to understand some of the Scottish Gaelic used in these programmes, but have had no experience with the written language. With the exception of some students from Donegal, few have been to Scotland or met a speaker of Scottish Gaelic elsewhere.

From these initial exchanges, I also gain an insight into the composition of the class: how many native speakers, how many good speakers, how many with major grammatical problems. I like to finish off the first lesson by handing out a text to the students which they have to prepare at home for the next class to the best of their abilities. This gives the students a first idea of what written Scottish Gaelic is like and how it compares to Irish. It also encourages them to apply their existing Q-Celtic language skills.

In the next lesson, I read the text out in stages and discuss the meaning and any difficulties with the students. (Obviously, instead of an exhaustive explanation with a lot of grammatical detail, such as for example the copula sentences - which in Scottish Gaelic differ significantly from Irish - I only briefly give the meaning of the phrase in question at this point and tell the students that complex issues, such as the copula, will be covered in detail during the course). By discussing the text and asking the students questions about it, I also determine the students' general level of grammatical understanding. My class tends to grasp at least the basic essence of the Scottish Gaelic text, and questions normally evolve around the use of the copula and specific problems with vocabulary and idiom. By using this method, the students are not only involved in the learning process from the beginning, so that each of them has his/her own personal learning experience, it also gives me a good idea as to where the students are linguistically, both in Irish and in Scottish Gaelic. I particularly like to use one of Ruairidh MacIleathain's *Litir do Luchd Ionnsachaidh* ('Letter to Learners')<sup>12</sup> for this first assessment, since his texts present a lovely example of clear, non-literary Gaelic, which is close to the spoken word, without the colloquialisms and difficult idioms so common in the spoken language. The 'letters' are intended for learners of Scottish Gaelic and usually discuss an issue broadly related to Scottish Gaelic culture

<sup>12</sup> A new *Litir do Luchd Ionnsachaidh* is read out by the author each Friday morning at 11.50 am on *Radio nan Gaidheal*. Past issues are available for download (printed version and MP3) from the BBC WebPages (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/alba/foghlam/litir/index.shtml>).

and language. Each letter is only just over one A4-page long and at the end Ruairidh discusses particular grammatical and lexicographical features arising from the text, which make them particularly suitable for self-study or home-work.

After having categorised the class, I devise a suitable course plan. As already mentioned, the standard teaching materials for Scottish Gaelic can only be of limited use, and the extent to which I might be able to draw on them is to a larger extent determined by the level of understanding of the grammatical features of the already familiar language by the class, and to a lesser extent by how much Scottish Gaelic they already know. This means, that from this point onwards, the make-up of each class will determine the exact method used to teach them.

In the following, I am going to introduce the different approaches for two classes: the first one for a class consisting of students with a native or near native standard of Irish and a good understanding of grammar, and the second one for a class consisting of students many of which have problems with Irish and/or general grammatical concepts. Obviously, these present the most extreme cases in the spectrum and the majority of classes will be found somewhere in between these two.

**Class A: Students with a native or near-native standard of Irish and a relatively good understanding of grammar.** This group is very familiar with the basic structure of another Q-Celtic language, so that reference can be made to this in class. In other words, many grammatical concepts, such as the difference between the copula and the substantive verb should need little or no explanation. Instead, focus can be placed upon those aspects of Scottish Gaelic different from Irish, with exercises directly arising out of this, hence teaching the students how to recognize and deal with these differences. A certain amount of comparative tables might also be used. Each lesson consists of the following three main sections:

*(A) Reading*

Since this class has already a good understanding of Irish, it should not have too many problems dealing with texts in Scottish Gaelic and they can be used without further introduction. However, for reasons which will be dealt with in the section below on grammar, it is preferable to let the students prepare the texts at home, rather than have them attempt them in class.

I tend to use a great variety of texts, in particular short pieces,

which either contain a lot of dialogue or whose style is close to the spoken language, such as the already mentioned *Litir do Luchd Ionnsachaidh* or a short play. By allocating roles to individual students to read out texts containing a lot of dialogue, such as plays, a maximum number of students can be engaged at the same time, which is particularly important in a large class. If the students are rather confident, the texts can even be acted out within the class. Repeatedly speaking and hearing these colloquial Gaelic phrases helps fix them in the students' memory, so that they can serve as a basis for future real-life communication.

#### (B) Pronunciation

Pronouncing Scottish Gaelic by a speaker of Irish involves essentially un-learning previously learnt rules of speech representation in written form, combined with new, unfamiliar sounds, which are often perceived as difficult. This includes very common Irish words which are spelt the same in Scottish Gaelic, such as *bean*, *mac*, *beag*, *saor* but for which the pronunciation varies quite significantly between the two languages. I found that students are often very slow to change their pronunciation of certain letter-combinations and words. To make the distinction as obvious as possible and to encourage the students to attempt a Scottish Gaelic pronunciation of Scottish Gaelic words, I place particular emphasis on those features of Scottish Gaelic pronunciation which vary most from Irish. This includes the hardening of voiced consonants in intervocalic and final position, as well as pre-aspiration. Also mentioned should be the much stronger stress-pattern in Scottish Gaelic and the resulting elision of unstressed vowels. Generally, these differences are best illustrated by whole sentences which can be repeated by the students, who thus practise the sounds within their syntactic context and in a more natural environment. In this way, the pronunciation of individual words and the rhythm and melody of the language are assimilated simultaneously. This might be done by using sentences like *'Tha botal nam dhòrn cuideachd'*, *'Bha a' phoit aice aig mo mhac lapach'*, *'Dh'fhaodadh tu Eilidh a phòsadh'*, and *'Chunnaic mi a' bhùth tràth 'sa mhadainn'*. Proverbs such as *'Rud a chì na big, is e a nì na big'*, *'Sin mar a tha, mar a bha, 's mar a bhithas'* or *'Beannachd le cleachdadh na h-òige'* are particularly popular and memorable, as well as tongue-twisters. Nevertheless, pronunciation represents a particularly persistent challenge to speakers of Irish, native speakers and learners alike, and the more advanced a class is, the more attention can and should be paid to it.

#### (C) Grammar

This particular section presents the teacher with another challenge, due to the aforementioned absence of suitable text-books. How the situation can be dealt with depends on the level of the students' general grammatical awareness, including the degree to which particulars of Irish grammar are known. This is also a section which native speakers of Irish unaware of the grammatical structures of their mother-tongue might find difficult. As has been mentioned in the section on reading, texts may be used to first determine the level of grammatical understanding of the students and then as a basis for the explaining and clarifying of certain grammatical features. However, care should be taken that the students do not come to regard the texts purely as grammatical exercises. To help avoid this, it might be preferable to focus on one or two grammatical features per text rather than aim to provide an exhaustive grammatical analysis. By using texts in this way the students are directly involved in the learning-process, since they have prepared the text at home and know what sections they had difficulties with or did not understand at all and hence will be more open to the teacher's explanations. In most cases, successive texts can be chosen which contain at least some of the previously handled grammar-points. This allows the students to recognize and master structures which they were previously unable to handle. From the level of their ability to do this, the teacher can gauge how successful his/her explanations were.

With this kind of group, the use of some tables to illustrate grammatical differences between Irish and Scottish Gaelic, for example the prepositional pronouns or noun declensions, can work well. In the case of the verbal system, however, due to the larger amount of tenses of Irish versus the more complicated tense and aspect system of Scottish Gaelic, tables should probably be only used in the case of the verb 'to be'.

**Class B: Students with basic Irish and/or problems with grammar.** In a class where the general standard of Irish is not very high and the knowledge of grammatical concepts is rudimentary at best, the students' prior knowledge of a Q-Celtic language is of very limited benefit when learning Scottish Gaelic. Indeed, it can even constitute an added difficulty, since these students tend to confuse the two languages to a much greater extent than students from Class A. It is therefore hardly useful to introduce Class B to texts in the same way as has been described in connection with Class A. Still, depending on the amount of hours available for teaching, easy texts can and should be introduced, particularly towards the end of the

term.

I would suggest using one of the standard teaching texts instead, where any already familiar sections, such as some of the prepositional pronouns, might be dealt with quickly. As regards which one of the standard teaching-materials to use, this depends on the class environment. *Cothrom Ionnsachaidh* is best suited for teaching at university in my opinion, since it places the greatest emphasis on grammar and hence aims to instruct the learner of Scottish Gaelic to a high level of grammatical understanding and language production. For less formal settings, where the emphasis is on more colloquial and mainly spoken Scottish Gaelic, such as an evening class or summer school, *Scottish Gaelic in Three Months, Teach Yourself Gaelic*, or *Speaking Our Language* will provide excellent results.

(The order in which I mention these three works also ranks them according to their level of emphasis on the spoken language, which goes hand in hand with less stress on grammar.) When using one of the standard teaching texts, the students might initially be slightly surprised to start with basics such as *Có thusa? Is mise Tina* ('Who are you? I am Tina'). Since I found, however, that many students in Class B have difficulties with even simple copula-sentences, it makes sense to start at the beginning. That way, the weaker students do not lose out, with any already existing grammatical knowledge being a bonus, not a necessity. From time to time, when a particular grammar section has been finished or when the amount of grammar becomes a bit overwhelming for the students, I give them a bit of a breather and do a song with them, either a pop-song or a traditional one, again, depending on the interests of the class.

Obviously, students from Class B will need to spend more time on grammar, which means that less emphasis can be placed on pronunciation than with the more advanced Class A. Nevertheless, I believe that even Class B should be presented with a certain number of pronunciation exercises, so that the worst of bad pronunciation habits can be avoided and the students receive at least some active understanding of the differences in phonology between the two languages. Apart from making use of the already mentioned drill sentences, I also speak as much Scottish Gaelic as possible in class. For example, on entering the room, I always greet the class in Scottish Gaelic, varying the forms of address I use, so that the students have to adapt their responses accordingly. Furthermore, before the actual class begins, I move around and have brief conversations with different students present, appropriate to their linguistic level. The aim is to emulate as much as possible a natural environment, in which to use the language and to encourage the

students to enter into conversation with native speakers at a future date. Ideally, this approach would be supplemented with classes in the language-laboratory. However, while some of the language courses include tapes, CD-ROMS, or videos, no teaching material specially designed for the use in language laboratories exists as yet to my knowledge. What's more, none of the available material is designed for learners with a prior knowledge of Irish.