

**Ó Lámhacán go Siúl go Rith
(From Crawling to Walking to Running)
An approach to teaching
writing in Irish by e-mail**

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To help students more closely match their command of Irish with the intellectual content of their writing in that language, a two year course, Ó Lámhacán go Siúl go Rith, (From Crawling to Walking to Running) was implemented. Starting with the simplest of one verb sentences, a month by month increase in sentence complexity was permitted. Advantages and disadvantages of this approach are discussed.

This article outlines my experience in teaching writing in Irish by e-mail over a five year period (1999 – 2004) and describes the changes in teaching methods that were adopted in the light of my experience. Aspects of the language that pose the greatest difficulty to students are highlighted, as are the approaches that were taken towards overcoming these difficulties.

First, a disclaimer. I have no formal training as a teacher, am not a native speaker of Irish, have not lived in Ireland for almost 40 years, and my professional background is in pharmaceutical research. My formal study of Irish ceased in 1958 on completion of 6 years of secondary schooling at Coláiste Mhuire, Dublin, an Irish Christian Brothers' Gaelscoil. I did not return to the study of the language until 1996. Since I assumed, correctly, that my students would be imperfectly bilingual, I decided that rather than concentrating initially on plot, dialog and character development, I first needed to improve students' grasp of grammar and syntax.

Dialects

As far as dialects are concerned, my own is Munster, more recently modified to ensure agreement with *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (The Official Standard; Rialtas na hÉireann 1995). I do, however, have a good grasp of all the dialects. At the beginning of each class year in September, students were required to select the dialect they would use and to then continue its use until the following April. No mixing of dialect-specific forms was permitted: either "ar an mbord" or "ar an bhord"; either "feicim" or "chím". Furthermore, the use of the more extreme forms of Munster Irish such as the non-mutating relative "ná" rather than the mutating "nach" were not allowed. To date no student has chosen to write in Donegal Irish although at least one current student has attended language courses in Donegal.

Recruitment

Initially, potential students were recruited via Gaeilge-B, (Gaeilge-B@listserv.heanet.ie) a list for beginners hosted by the Irish Higher Education Authority, with the proviso that they be capable of writing a 200 word autobiographical sketch in Irish. This served not only to exclude those whose command of the language was inadequate for my purposes but also highlighted areas of grammar and syntax that would require the closest attention. More recently requests for inclusion in the class have come from several other sources, in particular from members of NAACLT. Class size was restricted to no more than eight students and while attrition rates in earlier classes ranged as high as 50%, more recent rates are in the range of 15-20%. A combination of students' unrealistic expectations, births in the families of younger members and the time demands of the monthly assignments seem to have been the major factors in the earlier drop out rates. One student was expelled because his opposition to the teaching methods led him to canvas his fellow students to demand changes in methods and assignments. Returning students, having survived one or two difficult years were under few illusions as to what was expected of them.

Student Characteristics

The early classes (1999 through 2002) were composed of students of a broad age range (23 to 62) but as time passed and the workload became more onerous, there was a definite trend towards the younger members dropping out. Over the five years that the class has been in existence students have been drawn from the following countries: USA, Canada, Germany, Scotland, Japan and Australia. The most recent class (2003-4), however, consisted predominantly

of Americans, with a definite trend towards men in their retirement years after careers in one of the professions. Family backgrounds were largely first or second generation Irish-American, although there were notable exceptions to this generalization. An informal survey of the retired students suggested that "I always wanted to, but could never find the time." was a major factor in their interest and perseverance.

Developing a Syllabus

The first three years saw an almost complete lack of a lesson plan, reflecting my lack of teaching experience. In addition to an Irish to English translation (see below) the major monthly class work for these earlier years consisted of a short story or essay of not less than 200 words which was returned in corrected form to the submitter. Based on perceived problems in these submissions, a monthly set of notes on aspects of grammar, syntax and idioms was distributed to all students. A review of those earlier years highlighted several major problems. There was a definite tendency towards word for word translation from English to Irish, together with a great reluctance to tailor the intellectual content of their writing to the limits of their language capabilities. This latter problem led to the development of a course plan entitled "*Ó Lámhacán go Siúl go Rith*" (from crawling to walking to running). The essence of this approach, first introduced for the 2002-2003 class, is that, beginning with the simplest sentences, successive months see a gradual increase in permitted sentence complexity. Examples of the first four months of this approach are given below.

Month 1

Single verb sentences:

"Cheannaigh an fear nuachtán." (The man bought a newspaper.)

Month 2

No more than two verbs per sentence:

"Chuala mé ag gol í." (I heard her crying.)

Month 3

Two verbs and the direct relative clause:

"Leigh mé an nuachtán a cheannaigh m'athair."

(I read the paper that my father bought.)

Month 4

Direct and indirect relative clauses:

"An bus ar a raibh mé ag taisteal..."

(The bus on which I was traveling...)

Sentences akin to those above were sent to the students at the be-

ginning of each month to serve as the required opening sentence for that month's writing exercise. This did not sit well with several students who complained that this requirement "cramped their style". All assignments were due by the 21st of the month. Student adherence to this schedule was quite good.

Difficulties

Major difficulties were experienced with the use of the copula, direct and indirect relative clauses, verb + preposition constructions, indirect speech and choosing between dependent and independent verb forms. The lengths to which students would go in order to avoid the copula were extraordinary and often quite imaginative, while attempts to require the use of the indirect relative commonly resulted in disaster. This latter was tackled by having students analyze sentences as they would be written in rather stilted English.

"The man to whom the book is given." (An fear a dtugtar an leabhar dó)

"The woman whose son is a doctor." (An bhean a bhfuil a mac ina dhochtúir)

This approach was reasonably successful.

The copula was tackled with a series of intensive list quizzes requiring translation from Irish to English and English to Irish. Frantic efforts to avoid copulaic forms were widespread but tended to decrease with time. It was, nevertheless, necessary to return, time and again, to this aspect of the language. There is no evading the fact that the proper use of the copula is the *Pons Asinorum* of writing in Irish.

Translation Exercises

A requirement of the earlier classes was a monthly Irish to English translation. These ranged from excerpt from my own published and unpublished short stories to excerpts from novels such as Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'attaque* (Ó Tuairisc 1980) and the police procedural *Crann Smola* by Seán Ó Dúrois (Ó Dúrois 2001). Although the excerpts were rather difficult, the translations were of quite high quality, the only real difficulties being with unfamiliar idioms and a tendency to mimic Irish constructions (Would you be after giving me a cup of tea?). This raised, for me at least, the interesting question as to why the students' reading comprehension was so high while the actual impact of their reading on their own writing was so minimal. (Experienced teachers have subsequently explained to me that

reading comprehension and writing ability are two quite separate skills.) More recently, additional optional reading material in the form of articles from "An Teanga Bheo" in the Irish Times were provided to students after non-standard language forms and authorial idiosyncrasies were removed. Surprisingly, most students read these pieces and often submitted questions based on their readings.

As part of the redesigned teaching plan, a second translation exercise from English to Irish was introduced in a effort to foster skills in dialogue and colloquial speech. A short excerpt of one of these is given below.

"Guess what I heard in the office today." (Meas tú cad a chuala mé san oifig inniu.)

"I don't have a clue." (N'fheadar ar domhan.)

"Eoin and Síle are splitting up." (Tá Eoin agus Síle ag scaradh.)

"Why?" (Cad chuige?)

"Someone said there was another woman." (Deirtear gur bean eile atá i gceist.)

It rapidly became clear that regardless of how long they had been studying the language, (in one case on and off for twenty years) students could not themselves, nor could they imagine how to carry on a colloquial conversation and, as a consequence, could not write dialogue. This aspect of the students' writing development will be tackled in the coming year by an exercise entitled "Chatting up women/men in bars."

Results

The 2003-2004 class, comprised of returning students, one new student and one previous drop out, began with a highly compressed working review of the previous year's lessons. This was followed by a more relaxed approach to the aspects of the language not previously covered. Examples of the latter include the use of the repeated topic in extended sentences (Fear mór ard ab ea é, an fear sin a bhí feicthe agam cheana ag an aonach.), the proper use of emphasizing suffixes, and the use of the subjunctive both in dialog and in its more usual "wishing" sense. (Fan go gcloise d'athair; go maire tú an céad). By the end of this class there was a marked improvement in the standard of writing and a much improved matching of language ability with treatment of subject, the latter aided, perhaps, by the suggestion that the students imagine they were telling a story to a three to four year old. An error rate calculation

was used at year's end to measure the level of improvement in each student's work. Taking the first month's work as base, individual student improvement over the seven months of the class was calculated by counting the number of non-trivial errors per hundred words in each month's essay, noting month by month changes. Error reductions, apart from simple spelling errors such as "Sean" for "Seán" and "árd" for "ard", (see GaelSpell below) ranged from a low of 25 to a high of 60%. Of all the types of error, the ones that have remained most resistant to improvement are the choice of the wrong preposition + verb combination, (éirigh as v. éirigh ó) the "an..an" (an fear an tsiopa) error, and the qualified genitive (ag lorg oibre v, ag lorg obair sa chathair). A less quantifiable improvement was that a number of students showed clear evidence of having a keen eye for comedy and for interesting and sympathetic observations of the natural world and an improving descriptive ability. One student has had a short piece published in the Irish language literary magazine, *Comhar*.

Time investment

A rough estimate of the teacher's time spent per month on each student was two hours, with an additional three to four hours spent in preparing class materials. Several students report that the class work required 3-4 evenings per month.

Limitations

There is no way that a correspondence course can rival a class taught face to face by a well trained teacher. Among the weaknesses of the system described herein is the total absence of real time teacher-student interaction, not to mention pronunciation coaching and speaking practice. Much as the inclusion of these aspects of language study would improve outcomes, within the limits of teaching by e-mail, the system described above has had measurable positive outcomes and the general approach would not appear to be necessarily restricted solely to the teaching of writing in the Irish language.

Conclusion

It is possible to teach writing in Irish by e-mail, but it is necessary to develop solutions to problems that plague the students. Difficulties with the copula were approached using extended sentence lists in Irish, to be memorized, and in English to be translated, using the copula where possible. An interesting approach to the copula problem, Focus on Form (FOF) has been reported recently by Ó Conchubhair (Ó Conchubhair, 2003). The use of stilted English, (to

whom, from which, whose) aided in the acquisition of the rules for indirect relative clauses, while the insistence on gradually increasing sentence complexity provided an opportunity to match language ability to subject treatment. Short of memorizing sample sentences, there appears to be no way to solve the verb+ preposition problem. Patience is essential in cases of serious weaknesses in the students' grasp of the language, as is a sense of humor. The fact that so many students finished the course is a credit to their persistence and their desire to learn to write in Irish.

Study aids

GaelSpell 3

A free download for PC can be obtained by going to www.cruinneog.com. This is an extremely useful tool that is based exclusively on the main headwords in Ó Dónaill's dictionary. No *varia* are included. Highly recommended for those wishing to adhere to An Caighdeán Oifigiúil. Non-standard forms may be added as desired.

Foclóir Gaeilge Béarla (Ó Dónaill 1977) Essential

English-Irish Dictionary (de Bhaldraithe 1987) Essential, but disastrously out of date.

New Irish Grammar (The Christian Brothers 1995) Recommended.

Leabhar Gramadaí Gaeilge (Mac Congáil 2002) Highly recommended, in large part because it is based exclusively on the Ó Dónaill dictionary.

Focail i bhFócas (Mac Cionnaith 2003) A highly recommended bilingual thesaurus

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