

## References

Kelly, P. (2001). *Several Tired Children Howling (An Introduction to Manx Mutation)*. Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> annual convention of the North American Association for Celtic Language Teachers, Jersey City, NJ

## TEACHING FORUM

### Workshop Report – Experimenting with “speech first”

*Mary Roguski*

#### **Introduction**

New students of Irish are rarely aware of the variety of challenges facing them. While greater numbers of people have experience with at least one foreign language, this experience is usually of little help in grasping concepts like lenition, eclipsis, and a syntax that sometimes seems far removed from that of the Romance and Germanic languages that most have studied. Even attempting to read a simple proverb aloud can be discouraging for a beginner, given Irish spelling conventions.

In my work teaching beginners on a weekly basis with Gaeltacht Minnesota, I have benefited from the open-ended format of the classes. If students could commit the time, I could work with them long-term to learn the “code” to the spelling. Gaeltacht Minnesota also offers workshops during the year, and the beginning level is often populated largely by individuals who are unable to attend the weekly classes, whether due to their schedules or because they live a significant distance away. Contact time with these participants is, obviously, limited; the day-long workshop offers only about four hours in the classroom. Rather than spend valuable time early in the day having the students look at handouts and listen to a teacher explain spelling correspondences, I set the tone for our time together by having them spend the first session hearing, repeating, and using basic Irish with each other without looking at the written forms, then following up with spelling in a subsequent session.

#### **Structure and implementation**

The basic Irish used in the first session consisted of conversational exchanges, fourteen items in total (ex. 1)<sup>1</sup>. Each utterance was introduced with an accompanying icon to help identify it; large reproductions of each icon were presented to the class during the demonstration of the utterances, and the entire set was made into a handout for the students to use to make notes for themselves on what they heard (ex. 2).

In the first session, students were shown an icon representing a particular phrase which was pronounced for them to repeat, first as a group and then individually. Next the pattern was repeated with the appropriate response, and the proper exchange of the two phrases was modeled and practiced. After all the utterances had been introduced in this way, the students worked in pairs practicing the exchanges amongst themselves. This practice took up the last ten minutes of the fifty-minute session.

During the next session I presented the basics of Irish spelling using my usual methods: I began by introducing vowel and simple consonant sounds, continued with the sounds of the lenited consonants, and ended with an overview of eclipsed consonants. After each step, proverbs were presented to them so they could practice what they had just learned. Once they had practiced on six proverbs, I gave them a handout with the utterances from the first session in one column and the English translations in random order in a second column (see ex. 3). Until this time, the students had not seen in print the Irish used the first session. Working on their own or with classmates, they figured out how each item would sound based on its spelling, and then by comparing this pronunciation to what they'd heard in the first session they were able to match the Irish spellings to their translations.

Handouts clearly setting out each question, answer and greeting, as well as some additional information such as dialectal variations, were distributed and discussed during the remaining sessions. There were additional activities using these same utterances, and also straightforward drill-like activities to practice specific concepts such as lenition and the vocative, which can be difficult concepts for beginners to grasp as presented by teach-yourself texts.

### Success? Results and responses

The participants seemed to take to the structure of the first session well. I noticed no reluctance on their part to try the Irish they'd been given. They also appeared to be comfortable asking questions about pronunciation of the utterances they'd been given. Some of the sounds used in the language are quite challenging for English speakers, for instance the "dh" fricative in "Dia dhuit" and the

<sup>1</sup>Ann Mulkern, instructor of the next higher level at this workshop, assisted me in deciding on the Irish to be presented and located the icons to represent each utterance. As her students were just beyond their first lessons in Irish, we combined the groups for the first session to give the advanced beginners a review and the absolute beginners some models apart from the teachers.

transition from broad "g" in the back of the mouth to the front vowel in "Gaeilge." More than one of the students heard that word start as "gr," from what I heard them saying and what I glimpsed on their "cheat sheets" as I circulated among them during their pairwork at the end of the hour.

A separate issue is how that first session impacted the rest of the day. Although all of the students were understandably overwhelmed when the spelling conventions were first introduced, I don't recall any expressing undue confusion as we continued to work with the material. Rather they seemed interested in applying the broad guidelines to the proverbs that were presented and attempting the pronunciation, and many of them did surprisingly well. There was also evidence of vocabulary retention in the second half of the day – when I asked them how their lunch had been, one replied "go maith!" ("Good!")

The attitudes of the students themselves are another indicator that the day went well. Feedback forms are routinely offered at Gael-tacht Minnesota workshops and all ten of the participants in my class returned them. In response to the question "Schedule permitting, would you come to another workshop, or recommend this event to a friend," each ticked the "Yes, definitely" box.

Nine of the ten students gave clearly positive comments about the instruction, with several commenting in particular the first session. One said that the workshop was at its best in "[b]eginning w/spoken Irish, not written." Another offered that it was a "[n]ice balance between pronunciation [sic] guides & actually being able to practice speaking." The comment of the tenth participant can also be interpreted favorably if we can trust that it is in direct response to the question of what worked well at the event: "It was way too much info to absorb, but I really wanted to know why some things are the way they are (spelling, pronunciation) and getting that information was what I was after as much as saying 'Hi, how are you?'"

What could be done better next time, per the feedback responses?

"Maybe not pack quite so much in lessons so we can spend a little more time getting phrases down."

"[P]lace pronunciation in parantheses after all Irish words on all handouts"

"Move the workshops & classes to Fargo-Moorhead!!" (presumably from a resident of that area)

"I'm only a beginner – I'll tell you when I learn a little more"

It would indeed be interesting to check in with these participants in the future, to see whether they feel like the workshop was a good starting point. If nothing else, we got them speaking Irish to each other within an hour of starting with the language, which I felt was a positive experience.

For my part, further refinements of this approach are inevitable, should I be called upon to teach this level again at this event. I'd like to give serious thought to two of the non-jocular suggestions from the feedback form, though at this time I have no immediate solutions. First, the recommendation to supply pronunciations on handouts is a valid one, but as I explained at the time, my intent in omitting them was to avoid confusion with the system the students used for themselves in the beginning. Second, the suggestion to pack less into the class is a perennial concern. But boredom and stagnation are also risks in language learning – I frequently remind myself that if one waits until mastering a skill before trying something new, progress is limited. Experience and trial-and-error may be the only ways of determining the best balance of breadth and depth. More developed coaching may also help, by which I mean that perhaps my role as a workshop instructor is not just to teach the language, but also to suggest different ways of studying and alternate attitudes toward learning. For our participants, many of whom lack access to regular instruction, attitudes and adaptability are crucial to success as Irish learners.

Ex. 1. Phrases used. Items in parentheses were offered as illustration answers, and students were given the choice of using this same answer or supplying their own.

1a. Dia dhuit. *Hello [to one person].*

1b. Dia 'is Muire dhuit. *Hello [reply, to one person].*

2a. Dia dhaoibh. *Hello [to more than one person].*

2b. Dia 'is Muire dhaoibh. *Hello [reply, to more than one person].*

3a. Cé thusa? *Who are you?*

3b. Mise (Seáinín). *I'm (Seáinín).*

4a. Cén chaoi a bhfuil tú? *How are you?*

4b. Tá mé go maith. *I am well/good.*

5a. Cé as thú? *Where are you from?*

5b. Is as (Gaillimh) mé. *I'm from (Galway).*

6a. Cá bhfuil tú i do chónaí? *Where do you live?*

6b. Tá mé i mo chónaí i (Lios Mór). *I live in (Lismore).*

7a. An bhfuil Gaeilge agat? *Do you know ("have") Irish?*

7b. Tá beagán Gaeilge agam. *I know a little Irish.*

Ex. 2. First session handout for students, marked here to correspond with the utterances in Ex. 1.

Conver-sational Phrases

1a.



1b.



2a.



2b.



3a.



3b.



4a.



4b.





Ex. 3. Phrase match up for subsequent session

Mise Seáinín.	I live in Lismore.
Is as Gaillimh mé.	Do you have (any) Irish?
Tá beagán Gaeilge agam.	How are you?
Cén chaoi a bhfuil tú?	I'm Johnny.
Dia dhuit.	I have a little Irish.
Cé thusa?	Who are you?
Tá mé go maith.	Where do you live?
Cé as thú?	I'm from Galway.
Cá bhfuil tú i do chónaí?	I'm well.
Tá mé i mo chónaí i Lios Mór.	Hello.
An bhfuil Gaeilge agat?	Where are you from?

## Reviews

### *Maith Thú EDCO* – The Educational Company of Ireland

"Maith Thú" is an integrated series of books, posters, language learning cards (size A-4 'flash' cards) and CDs with accompanying Teacher's lesson cards. "Maith Thú" is directed at primary school students (Junior Infants to 6th class). The series includes the ten themes in the New Irish Curriculum – Myself, Home, At School, Food, Television, Shopping, Pastimes, Clothes, Weather and Special Occasions (holidays, etc.) Each of these themes is developed through listening and speaking exercises at the early levels (Junior Infants to 2nd Class) and through reading and writing at later levels (3rd to 6th Class). The children's books are linked to the Teacher's lesson cards. Grammar is taught through the communicative approach utilizing everyday situations.

Two 'Irish Speaking Puppets' Rocaí Rua and Mamó appear throughout the stories in Junior Infants, Senior Infants and 1st Class. The teacher's lesson cards include exercises in which the children role-play Rocaí and Mamó. Rhymes, songs, games, movement and action feature in abundance on the CDs.

Creative writing is introduced in the 3rd class and progresses through to the 6th class. Emphasis is placed on communication and conversation.

This is an attractively done series with lots of color and action. Reading text is presented in a cartoon-like format. Multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity appear throughout the stories. This is something that has not been done to this extent in previous Irish Textbooks.

**Reviewed by Bob Burke**  
Camas, Washington