

USING NORTHERN IRISH TEACHING STRATEGIES WITH
NORTH AMERICAN EVENING CLASS STUDENTS OF IRISH

Brian Ó Broin. William Paterson University, New Jersey

Teachers of Irish in North America have for years been faced with the difficulty of presenting the Irish language to adults who are ill-prepared for a formal language class. Adult learners of Irish in North America frequently do not have the basic knowledge that is assumed of their equivalents in the Republic of Ireland, and the North American class-organization situation is far from ideal, with students having to commute long distances, usually after work, to reach the classroom. Since most students are learning Irish for cultural, rather than academic or professional reasons, their educational level, classroom experience, and goals can also be at great variance with their equivalents in the Republic of Ireland. The growth of the language in Northern Ireland, however, and the rise of an adult-learner cohort there, as well as an informal educational system to service that cohort, provides North American teachers of Irish with excellent textbooks and pedagogical techniques for use in the classroom.

Adult students of Irish have until recently been a fairly homogeneous group concentrated in Ireland, comprising school and university students

taking Irish in a structured setting, and directing their studies towards passing formal examinations. Textbooks for such students are readily available, but typically expect that students have a certain knowledge of the language already and will study the material formally, picking up spoken Irish socially among their peers. So, for instance, *Úrchúrsa Gaeilge*, which is widely used by university Irish departments as a first- or second-year grounding in the language (Ó Baoill and Ó Tuathail, 1992). This is an excellent text, but makes heavy demands of its readers. In the first place, the book is entirely through Irish and very text-heavy; a randomly-chosen unit (22 “Seilbh agus Úinéarach” [“Possession and Ownership”]) provides a flavor:

22.1 Aidiachtaí Sealbhacha agus cuid

Is iad *mo*, *do*, *a* (*fir.*), *a* (*bain.*), *ár*, *bhur*, agus *a* (*iolra*) na hAidiachtaí Sealbhacha. Ní chuirtear béim an ghutha ar na haidiachtaí sealbhacha. Ar an ainmfhocal a leanann iad a bhíonn béim. (Ó Baoill and Ó Tuathail, 143)

22.1 The Possessive Adjectives and cuid

Mo, *do*, *a* (*masc.*), *a* (*fem.*), *ár*, *bhur*, and *a* (*plu.*) are the possessive adjectives. One does not place vocal stress on the possessive adjectives. The stress is placed on the following adjective.

The 36-unit book is obviously directed towards a one-year or two-semester lecture series directed at semi-fluent upper-level university students learning Irish as a grammatical, rather than a communicative, system. Units end with exercises that are clearly meant as nightly homework to be done alone, such as the following, from a unit devoted to the copula:

29.6 Tabhair Insint Dhíreach orthu seo sa Mhodh Ordaitheach le cibé pearsa agus uimhir a oireann don chomhthéacs . . .

29.7 Tabhair Insint Indíreach orthu seo a leanas . . .

29.8 Cuir ceann de na briathra, *deir sé*, *cloiseann sé*, *síleann sé*,

srl. roimh na habairtí seo a leanas agus déan pé athrú is gá . . .
(Ó Baoill and Ó Tuathail, 197-198)

Put the following [sentences] into direct speech [and] imperative mood, using whatever person and number is most appropriate to the context.

29.7 *Put the following into indirect speech.*

29.8 *Put one of the verbs he says, he hears, he thinks, etc. before the following sentences and and make whatever changes that are necessary.*

Such texts are very necessary at university level, but absolutely fail with casual adult learners of Irish, whether foreign or Irish, and indeed may no longer be useful as they were even with Irish university students, whose Junior-Certificate and Leaving-Certificate examinations are increasingly emphasizing oral and aural skill, rather than formal grammatical knowledge. Such textbooks will be of only limited use to teachers intending to work with American adults who are not grounded in grammatical vocabulary. Furthermore, most students have already carved such a large portion out of their schedules for the Irish class that homework is quite out of the question.

A possible alternative source of textbooks might be among those provided for lower-level Irish secondary students, and indeed textbooks series such as Pól de Bhál's *Beart is Briathar* (directed at the three-year Junior Certificate cycle for Irish students between 12 and 15 years of age) have met with some success in the adult setting. The biggest difficulty with using Irish school textbooks, however, is their assumption that the only absolute beginners are infants. Consequently, not a single textbook exists for Irish schools or universities that is directed at the older beginner.

The real breakthrough in the American adult classroom has originated, not in textbooks, but in Irish classroom pedagogy. The prime sources of

this new pedagogy are the adult-education centres *Oideas Gael* in Gleann Choilm Cille, Dún na nGall, *Áras Uí Chadhain* in An Cheathrú Rua, Gaillimh, and (more recently) *Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne* in Baile an Fheirtéaraigh, Ciarraí. All three adult-education centres draw a significant number of students from outside Ireland, including North America. These centres, as well as several others which have been more recently founded in other Gaeltachtaí, in Irish cities, or on Irish university campuses¹, sell themselves not just as suppliers of inservice auxiliary courses for school-teachers and civil servants, but as holiday packages where students not only learn Irish, but participate in a lively community that revolves around both college and surrounding Gaeltacht community.

Oideas Gael is an excellent model for discussion, having been offering courses to adults on a “Cultural Tourism” basis since 1984 and employing teachers from around Ireland and the globe with experience teaching adults. One of *Oideas Gael*'s most prominent teachers, and now the director of *Gaelchultúr Teoranta* in Dublin, Éamonn Ó Dónaill, has been actively involved, either as consultant or as author, in the production of several Irish-language textbooks that mark the shift in pedagogical emphasis at adult-level.

The beginner- and intermediate-level textbooks *Abair Leat*, which Ó Dónaill co-authored with Siúán Ní Mhaonaigh, are a direct result of *Oideas Gael*'s pedagogical methods, and were designed for use amongst Northern Irish adult learners of Irish who, having gone through the British

educational system, knew no Irish². The language movement in Northern Ireland had been growing since the late 1960s, partially as a result of the revived nationalist movement, which set itself at odds with English and British culture. There was suddenly a need for Irish classes amongst adults who wished not only to communicate with their children attending immersion schools, but also amongst themselves. These adults were, for the most part, different to the adult learner communities in the republic, in that they might not have studied further than O-level or GCSE³, and were very unlikely to have ever studied Irish⁴.

Abair Leat was funded by *Iontaobhas Ultach*, a Belfast-based organization devoted to promoting the Irish language across all communities in Northern Ireland. The course was directed towards people who might be vaguely interested in Irish but did not have the money (or the interest) to buy a textbook for home study. This might be their first attempt to learn a language. For this reason, the text had to avoid grammar and rote-learning, emphasizing instead spoken Irish and everyday vocabulary. The text was to be bought by the teacher alone and handouts photocopied at a small charge to the students for use at home. On the understanding that many language teachers/activists were themselves not much beyond the level of advanced learners, and probably inexperienced in pedagogy, the text offered clear instructions to the teacher on how to prepare classes and explicate whatever rules of grammar might need to be explained. The text also emphasized the Ulster dialect of Irish, which was most commonly used by

¹ *Gael Linn*, of course, and *Conradh na Gaeilge* have been offering courses to adults in Dublin for decades, but these courses are mostly aimed at Irish adults returning to the language and employ no strict pedagogical philosophy. Ionad na Gaeilge Labhartha (*The Spoken Irish Center*) of National University of Ireland Galway, has been particularly proactive in offering programmed courses at all adult levels, including the university's foreign students. The *Oideas Gael* pedagogical model has recently been introduced to Dublin and Ireland's regional cities with *Gaelchultúr Teoranta*, which holds its classes in Temple Bar and has a significant percentage of foreign students.

² A significant number of *Oideas Gael*'s Irish students come from Northern Ireland.

³ The British and Northern-Irish equivalent of the Republic's Junior Certificate. A government paper published in 2001 reported that 56% of schoolchildren's parents in Belfast had no education beyond O-level or GCSE. The most negative attitudes towards education were in West Belfast where many nationalists live (73-74). 89% of people in Northern Ireland claim absolutely no knowledge of the Irish language (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency).

⁴ Irish was only permitted as a GCSE subject in 1993. In 2009 only 2165 students sat the exam (Joint Council for Qualifications).

northern speakers, despite being frequently derided in the Republic, where a Munster/Connacht mix was the most common variety taught and used in schools. This was a sea change in language pedagogy. The text's authors understood that perfection or grammatical precision were unnecessary at the introductory level. Rather, students were to be given concrete uses for the language at the earliest possible stage, regardless of their skill-level. Emphasis was laid on community-building, with every class incorporating a coffee break, for instance.

Abair Leat might be the first published textbook that, although directed at an adult learning cohort, was not presented in a teach-yourself style⁵. This textbook is an excellent springboard for a discussion of American student needs, as will become clear. *Abair Leat* assumes that its user may have no formal teaching experience⁶ and therefore provides a startlingly lucid six-page primer for language teaching, offering rules that apply most pointedly to the North American learner community, although originally directed at a Northern Irish community. For example, teachers are advised not to ask questions of individuals in front of the whole class, reminding the teacher that many language students are very unsure of their skills and afraid of making errors publicly:

. . . [N]á cuir foghlaimeoirí faoi bhrú le ceisteanna crua. B'fhearr ceisteanna a dhíriú ar an rang ina iomláine ("An bhfuil a fhios ag éinne . . . ?") seachas ar dhuine amháin. Cuimhnigh go mbíonn cuid de na foghlaimeoirí an-neirbhíseach agus ag rá leo féin, "Tá súil agam nach gcuireann sé ceist ar bith ormsa. Déanfaidh mé amadán díom féin." (Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol. I, vii.)

⁵ Teach-yourself Irish texts are legion, of course, from the early Gael-linn and Linguaphone recordings through Micheál Ó Siadhail's famously quirky *Learning Irish* to Éamonn Ó Dónaill's *Irish on Your Own*. The popular *Rosetta Stone* is available in Irish since 2008.

⁶ Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol I.v. "Tá [an cúrsa] fóirsteanach do mhúinteoirí atá ar bheagán taithí chomh maith leo siúd a bhfuil roinnt mhaith taithí acu." ("The course is suitable for teachers who have little experience as well as those who have lots of experience.")

Don't put learners under pressure with difficult questions. It would be preferable to direct questions to the whole class ("Does anybody know . . .?") instead of one person. Remember that some of the learners are very nervous and telling themselves, "I hope he doesn't ask me a question. I'll make a fool of myself."

An even more vital suggestion to teachers is to avoid discussing personal things such as sex, and marital or employment status:

Ná pléigh rudaí róphearsanta, go háirithe a dteaghlach (mar shampla, "Cén post atá ag d'athair?") agus a gcuid oibre, agus ná bí de shíor ag plé ábhar trom mar cholscaradh agus ghinmhilleadh. Má theastaíonn uait díriú ar rudaí mar obair agus chúlra, bain úsáid as rólghníomhú mar a dhéantar sa chúrsa seo.

Ná húsáid droch-chaint agus seachain tagairtí do chúrsaí gnéis. Tá na rudaí sin ceart go leor i gcomhrá pearsanta ach goilleann siad ar dhaoine sa rang. Cuir stop láithreach leis an té atá tugtha dá leithéid (Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol I, viii)

Don't discuss things that are too personal, particularly their households (for example, "What job does your father have?") and their jobs, and don't be always discussing heavy subjects like divorce and abortion. If you want to concentrate on things like work and background, use role play, as this course does.

Don't use bad language and avoid references to sexual matters. Those things are fine in personal conversation, but they annoy people in class. Put an immediate stop to anybody who tends towards such matters.

Since religion, employment, and marital status could be controversial issues in Northern Ireland (and increasingly in the Republic, where the Catholic Church has suffered heavy setbacks in the last two decades), the text counsels treating such subjects with great care in class, but they are

central issues and their vocabulary must be taught. In the United States, where public morality is frequently at odds with individual life-choices, such discussions are also frowned upon. The text side-steps such issues by encouraging role-play. Students are (for example) given photocopied cards which give them a random marital status and a random number of brothers and sisters⁷. In course-units on the family, students simply take these roles, rather than being forced to reveal personal details about themselves.

Many teachers of Irish in North America still rely over-heavily on the written word. Since many of them have had little exposure to the spoken word themselves, it is natural to take refuge in the written word⁸, on which most older Irish textbooks relied. Access to Irish broadcast media on the Internet is still very recent, and the programming may be at a level beyond that of the average American Irish teacher. Nevertheless *Abair Leat* makes no secret of its hostility to teaching via the written word⁹, suggesting that students only be allowed see the written version of the words and phrases they have learned after the activity:

Molaimid . . . nach gcaithfeadh an múinteoir mórán ama ag scríobh ar an chlár; tá sé níos fearr, i gcás glantosaítheoirí, am a chaitheamh ar athrá agus gan an focal scríofa a bheith feicthe ag na foghlaimeoirí go dtí go mbíonn an fuaimniú ceart ar eolas acu. Ceann de na fáthanna a bhfuil an bhileog le hachóimriú ar ábhar gach ranga le fáil sa chúrsa seo nó le cinntiú go sásaítear na daoine a bhraitheann ar an fhocal scríofa le rud a fhoghlaim. (Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol I, ix)

We recommend that the teacher not spend much time writing on the board; it is better, in the case of complete beginners, to spend

⁷ Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol I., Unit 3 (21-25). It is also suggested that the teacher might use pictures of well-known celebrity families from entertainment journals such as *Hello!* as alternative identities for students. This lends the exercise a pleasant air of levity.

⁸ The first, and still the only, pronouncing dictionary of Irish, *An Gúm's Foclóir Póca*, is only twenty-four years old.

⁹ Beginners, in any case, will not readily see the regularity of the Irish spelling system, and for this reason, text-based courses can often simply frustrate.

time on repeating without the written word visible to the learners until they know the right pronunciation. One of the reasons that the recapitulation handout is made available in this course is to satisfy people who depend on the written word to learn something.

For this reason, *Abair Leat* comes with CDs. These CDs are to be used during the class as part of listening comprehension exercises and to provide examples of phrases that students are expected to learn. Each class plan provides the teacher with symbols showing when to play the CD and each CD's material can be followed on a transcription in the textbook. These CDs allow the text to provide students with correct pronunciation, which the teacher may or may not choose to use.

Central to *Abair Leat's* teaching philosophy is group work and hands-on classroom activity. This is very necessary for students who may not have excelled during their own formal education, and who may associate top-down teacher-led classrooms with boredom and incomprehensibility. Insisting that students actively participate in the class every few minutes gives them a much greater stake in the class. Each class comprises two portions separated by a short coffee-break. The first portion uses the CD to provide students with correct pronunciation and allows the teacher to introduce the class's central phrases, and perhaps some minor grammatical or social explanation of the phrases, to the students, and asks that students informally practice the phrases amongst themselves. The second half of the class, however, requires that students participate in a group or class-wide activity. In the unit concerning one's area and community, for instance, students are given a picture of their (fictional) home town's center and are asked to find other students in the class with the same town center, but using only standard greetings and the questions "An bhfuil X i do cheantar?" ("Is there a X in your area?"), where X is *banc*, *siopa*, *ollmhargadh*, *teach tábhairne*, etc (*bank*, *shop*, *supermarket*, *bar*).

- (i) The object of the activity is to find one or more people with the same town plan as yours.
- (ii) You must not look at other learners' cards.
- (iii) Take turns at asking each other whether or not your town has certain facilities.
- (iv) If the two plans are the same, both of you should walk around together and try to find someone else with the same town plan. (Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol I, 12)

Whether or not they find a match amongst their classmates is beside the point - they are given the opportunity to repeatedly hear and ask common questions and answers, and since they are speaking to their peers, they will be less nervous than if called out in front of the whole class. A final exercise usually asks the students to apply their newly-acquired vocabulary in a listening comprehension exercise. They are given a handout to take home with a summary of what they have learned in class.

The authors' reasoning for incorporating so much activity and group work into their course is outlined in the course's second volume, directed at upper-level beginners and low intermediate students. The first volume had been in use for three years at this point, and it is clear that the authors had received some criticism of the course's emphasis on these activities and wished to explain their importance:

- 1) An buntáiste is mó a bhaineann le hobair bheirte agus ghrúpa ná go dtugann siad seans do na foghlaimeoirí i bhfad níos mó cainte a dheanamh ná mar a fhaigheann siad deis a dhéanamh i rang nach mbíonn a leithéid i gceist ann.
- 2) Nuair a bhíonn obair bheirte agus ghrúpa i gceist i rang, bíonn foghlaimeoirí níos gníomhaí agus is lú seans atá ann go dtitfidh siad ina gcodladh! Nuair nach mbíonn ach foghlaimeoirí amháin ag labhairt ag an am, tarlaíonn sé go minic go mbíonn roinnt de na foghlaimeoirí eile atá in ainm is a bheith ag éisteacht léi/leis ag smaoiniamh ar rud eile ar fad.

3) Cothaíonn gníomhaíochtaí beirte agus grúpa atmaisféar maith sa rang.

4) Tá obair bheirte nó ghrúpa níos fóirsteanaí don té atá ciúin, faiteach nó neirbhíseach; tá sé níos fusa ag duine mar seo labhairt le duine nó beirt seachas labhairt os comhair an ranga ar fad.

5) Faigheann foghlaimeoirí cleachtadh ar chumadh ceisteanna. Tarlaíonn sé uaireanta i ranganna níos 'traidisiúnta' gurb í/é an múinteoir a chuireann formhór na gceisteanna agus nach mbíonn deis ag na foghlaimeoirí an ghné thábhachtach seo den teanga a chleachtadh.

6) Bíonn inní ar mhúinteoirí go minic go mbeidh na foghlaimeoirí ag foghlaim earráidí ó chéile; tarlaíonn sé go pointe ach nuair a bhíonn roinnt daoine ag obair le chéile i ngrúpa is mó seans atá an go gceartóidh siad a chéile agus go múinfidh siad foclóir dá chéile.

7) Bíonn deis ag foghlaimeoirí straitéisí tábhachtacha a fhorbairt nuair a bhíonn siad ag obair le chéile, cuir i gcás an dóigh le tús a chur le comhrá, le forbairt a dheanamh ar phointe, le pointe nár tuigeadh a athrá ar dhóigh níos soiléire, agus mar sin de. Dá bharr seo, bíonn sé níos fusa dóibh déileáil le comhrá laethúil.

8) Tugann obair bheirte agus ghrúpa seans do na foghlaimeoirí foirmeacha treise a chleachtadh agus, lena chois sin, cleachtadh a dhéanamh ar cheist a chur atá duine eile díreach i ndiaidh a chur orthusan:

Foghlaimeoir 1: Cé as tú?

Foghlaimeoir 2: As Ard Mhacha. Cé as tú féin? (Ó Dónaill and Ní Mhaonaigh, Vol I, vi-vii)

1) The greatest advantage associated with working in pairs and groups is that it gives learners a chance to speak a lot more than they would in classrooms where such activities do not take place.

2) When working in pairs and groups takes place in a class, learners are more active, and there's less of a chance that they will fall asleep! When only a single learner is talking, it frequently happens that other learners who are supposed to be listening to him/her are actually thinking of something else entirely.

3) Pair- and group work promotes a good atmosphere in the class.

4) Pair- and group work is better for quiet, fearful, or nervous people; it is easier for people like this to speak to one or two people, rather than to speak before the whole class.

5) Learners get the chance to make up questions. It happens in more "traditional" classes that the teacher asks most of the questions and the learners don't get a chance to practice this important aspect of the language.

6) Teachers are often worried that the learners will learn errors from each other; this does happen to a point, but when people are working in a group, there is a greater chance that they will correct each other and that they will teach vocabulary to each other.

7) Learners have the opportunity to develop important strategies when they are working together, for example how to start a conversation, how to develop a point, how to restate a misunderstood point for clarity, and so on. Because of this, it is easier for them to deal with everyday conversation.

8) Pair- and group work gives the learners a chance to practice emphatic forms, and in addition, a chance to practice asking a question that has just been asked of them:

Learner 1: Where are you from?

Learner 2: From Ard Mhacha. Where are you from yourself?

Point 2 underscores that the typical students of such a course are evening students, probably coming to the classroom after work. Without

activities there is the real danger of their losing interest and falling asleep.

Point 3 makes an observation that many putative Irish teachers forget - since most adult students of Irish in Northern Ireland and North America are learning the language for cultural reasons rather than professional, they want to enjoy their experience, and their teachers should also surely be trying to create an atmosphere of fun. Adult students can vote with their feet and pockets, unlike children and university students, and it is important for the language's profile that students associate the language with fun. Activities like group work develop camaraderie and encourage students to get to know each other. Students of the language are unlikely to continue their involvement in the language unless they have a positive experience in their classes. Many North American teachers, who learned Irish "the hard way," using grammars and attending intensive examination-oriented university courses, often feel that they should replicate their own learning experiences, which rarely suit the typical adult learner nowadays.

Abair Leat is very conscious of flying in the face of traditional language pedagogy, noting in point 5 that 'traditional' teacher-driven pedagogy gives students the ability to reply to questions while forgetting that the students must also learn to ask the questions in Irish.

Point 7 makes the absolutely vital observation that group work activity teaches the students strategies for natural conversation that they will simply not pick up in rote situations. We are all familiar with students who are quite unable to produce a form after class that they have successfully mastered in class. The problem is, of course, their inability to connect the form with real conversational situations.

The new textbooks directed at the teachers of complete beginners in Northern Ireland, then, have a very important role to play in the development of language classes in North America. They acknowledge that teachers are often themselves learners who may have little teaching experience

and recognize that students are usually too busy to devote much more than an evening a week to their language class. They see the need for language classes to have a social element if students are to make positive associations with the language, and they understand that the modern adult student of Irish has a low tolerance for traditional grammar-based, rote-learning pedagogical techniques. *Abair Leat* is not the only textbook available for adult learners, but it is the only one specifically directed at teachers, rather than students. Assuming that its teachers are language activists, but not experts in either the language or its pedagogy, it provides sound instruction from experienced teachers in how to run an informal evening class. The text is only available for purchase through its publishers, Iontaobhas Ultach, at <http://www.ultach.dsl.pipex.com/publications.htm>.

References

- An Gúm. (1986). *Foclóir Póca*. Baile Átha Cliath: An Roinn Oideachais.
- de Bhál, Pól. (1989). *Beart is Briathar 1*. Baile Átha Cliath: An Cló Ceilteach.
- de Bhál, Pól. (1990). *Beart is Briathar 2*. Baile Átha Cliath: An Cló Ceilteach.
- Ó Baoill, Dónall P. and Éamonn Ó Tuathail. (1992). *Úrchúrsa Gaeilge*. Baile Átha Cliath: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann.
- Joint Council for Qualifications [UK]. <<http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/1131/GCSE%20Trends.pdf>>.
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2002. Belfast: NISRA. <<http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/mapxtreme/viewdata/Census/CensusKS24.xls>>
- Ó Dónaill, Éamonn. (1994). *Irish on Your Own*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ó Dónaill, Éamonn and Siuán Ní Mhaonaigh. (1999). *Abair Leat! Leibhéal 1; Cuid 1*. Béal Feirste: Iontaobhas Ultach.
- Ó Dónaill, Éamonn and Siuán Ní Mhaonaigh. (1999). *Abair Leat! Leibhéal 1; Cuid 2*. Béal Feirste: Iontaobhas Ultach.
- Ó Siadhail, Micheál. (2006). *Learning Irish*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rosetta Stone Version 3: *Irish Level 1, 2 & 3* [DVD-Rom]. Rosetta Stone: Arlington, VA. 2008.