There Are More Questions Than Answers

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> There are more questions than answers
> Pictures in my mind that will not show
> There are more questions than answers
> And the more I find out the less I know
> Yeah, the more I find out the less I know.
> *Johnny Nash*

Can the opening lines of a 1970s reggae/pop song assist teachers to empower their adult student of Irish to avoid the plateau on which many become rooted as soon as they have learned basic greetings and conversation openers? Many of us encounter students who have been trapped by the apparently innocuous and imprisoning terrain of this plateau. Some students will accumulate vast quantities of vocabulary without accompanying fluency.

The initial position of the verb in Irish language sentence structure implies that learning verbs is crucial to gaining fluency; sentences cannot be started without them, yet this leap of faith frequently proves difficult for adult learners coming from English. Competence in asking questions in Irish

gives the learner power and control in a conversation, leads to greater confidence and accordingly a more active role in acquiring the language. This paper investigates the promotion of the interrogative form of Irish verbs in a range of textbooks ranging from the early days of the language revival to today and recommends that it be used much more dynamically than heretofore as a tool in the teaching of Irish.

In an ideal world, adults with the desire to acquire a new language would pick it up without any problem simply by immersion in it. Like any other craft the time taken might vary with innate individual ability but it would eventually happen. Although language acquisition cannot be considered completely linear, fluency would develop naturally on paths from comprehension to conversation and onward to reading and writing. However, teachers of second and subsequent languages are usually located far outside this ideal environment and they usually have to try to stimulate learning along these different paths concurrently rather than consecutively as would happen in total immersion. Adult students learn basic conversation exchanges and are often also introduced to reading at their first class, and writing very soon thereafter. Problems occur when students advance their understanding of the written word more quickly than their understanding of the aural; reading then appears to be the easiest route to comprehension and before long the student is able to recognize the written word and read silently with confidence, but may have major problems of confidence in speaking naturally or even with reading out loud.

The early days of the formal Irish language revival movement led to the establishment of *The Gaelic League* (henceforth *Conradh na Gaeilge*) in 1893. Since then many books supporting the teaching of the language have been published. *Conradh na Gaeilge* also had a prominent role in Irish political life, as for many Irish people the Irish language and Irish politics are inextricably bound. After the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 Irish became a compulsory language in all state-funded schools. The government of The Republic of Ireland, established in 1949, continued to support the revival of the Irish Language through the national and secondary school system and by supporting *Conradh na Gaeilge*. The economic downturn during the 1950s in Ireland led to widespread emigration and the growth of Irish communities abroad. These overseas communities set up their own support organizations such as County Associations, and Cultural Centers, and those emigrants who were particularly interested in the Irish language set up branches of *Conradh na Gaeilge*.

Since the initial impetus to revive the Irish language in the late 19th Century successive governments, government agencies, teachers, and Irish language enthusiasts have published textbooks. Printed materials in the Irish language outside the realm of textbooks, for example magazines and newspapers, were also funded as they were considered part of the complicated apparatus of language revival. Eventually, but not until the end of the twentieth century, radio and television were included as media whose contribution to language revival were considered essential. Throughout this period the Irish language has been interrogated, explained, loved, hated, taught with passion and zeal, reviewed, adjusted, and standardized. Today, while still a compulsory subject in Irish elementary and secondary schools, enthusiastic adult learners also approach Irish through classes within and outside scholastic atmospheres. Adult students of Irish who aspire to become proficient speakers may be found in Ireland and all over the world. Many are descendants of emigrants but the number also includes many without links to Ireland but with linguistic curiosity. Yet despite the variety of media now available to students, difficulties continue to surface in how to accomplish that aspiration. There has been continuous support and dedication since *Conradh na Gaeilge* was formed in 1893 to the establishment of Irish as an accepted and viable second language in Ireland but the question of why greater progress has not

been made is still often asked. There are many answers including some with political, economical and emotional factors, but irrespective of all explanations which enlighten us as to how we got to where we are today, the most important questions which must be answered are: How do we progress from here? How do we help students, wherever they are located, attain the fluency in Irish that they desire? And how do we encourage those who are close to fluency to speak confidently?

One of the best ways forward in language acquisition is through the communicative approach. Greater concentration on aural understanding and conversational expertise assists language learners in getting wherever they want to go on their language journey. Early pitfalls in the acquisition of Irish by adults cause disappointment and greatly contribute to the drop-out rate. One of the major challenges for adult learners is in continuing a conversation after they have rushed through the well-known and well-rehearsed basic conversation starters. In many cases the learner is then attacked by what may be called a *tocht*. The word *tocht* is Irish for an emotional constriction often causing a physical loss of speech: "An oppression seized me, I became unable to speak!" (Dineen 1927:1219) A student may know plenty of vocabulary, including verbs and grammatical rules and regulations but is stuck, cannot create a sentence, cannot communicate and is rendered dumb in the ensuing panic. The Irish language itself is often blamed, it is too hard, it is too complex, it's too crazy! Nonetheless many adult students do succeed with hard work and dedication in becoming fluent speakers. What is the key?

Thoughts about Verbs

In Irish, as in other Celtic languages, the verb is in the initial position in the sentence and so the importance of verbs needs to be stressed from the beginning. There is no substitute for learning verbs. It must be done and done well very early in the language learning cycle so that a student can start

a sentence without frustration. Moving from English to Irish requires this change in approach to communication and for those who encounter the Irish language for the first time as an adult it can be difficult to make this change. The danger always lurking is in trying to translate word for word, from one's mother tongue to Irish. In the case of moving from English to Irish energy spent on such mental gyrations is energy wasted. The early stages of Irish language acquisition must be made an interesting and easy passage for students where obstacles can be avoided and where achievement can be measured by their ability to converse, albeit simply, without stress, and *tocht* can be avoided or at least minimized.

There is a good selection of media available to adult learners of Irish. As mentioned successive Irish governments have supported the publishing of books, cassette tapes, DVDs and CDs. Nonetheless many adult learners end up with almost every book and every tape, CD and DVD on their shelves and yet still cannot converse effectively or confidently. It is interesting to note that many Irish textbooks include long lists of vocabulary and even sections on how to phrase things properly in, for example, Indirect Speech, thus providing an intellectual approach to the language while at the same time ignoring how to develop a simple and natural dialog through a series of questions and answers. *(These are the elements! Now go and figure out for yourself how to have a conversation.)* This is analogous perhaps to giving someone the ingredients for a cake and saying "Now make it!" without instruction on how to combine the ingredients properly, or even any indication of cooking times and temperatures!

The Interrogative Form of the Verb

Some of the books in this study include samples of very simple dialogs which may be useful to beginners. However there are few guides to assist a student in initiating conversation through mastery of the interrogative form

of the verb. Yet all would agree that conversation is fundamentally based on the exchange of information initiated by questions. The majority of the Irish language books included here present verbs to the learner conjugated in the standard way and often omit the interrogative form entirely. It is sometimes treated as a separate case of study as if learning how to pose a question is not of immediate importance in the acquisition of a new language, when in fact confidence in using the interrogative form is one of the most important elements contributing to fluency. Instead the emphasis is on *First Person Singular,* and the verb is conjugated from this point, thus giving the *First Person Singular* a prominent position in learning verbs and a good chance of being learned more successfully than all other forms. Taking this one step further to see how a student might apply his newly acquired knowledge to a conversation we encounter a very egocentric conversationalist. Would anyone want to converse with someone who starts every sentence with the word *"I"*? Do we know or like people like this? Students need to learn the interrogative forms of verbs in order to engage another person in conversation, thereby avoiding stilted commentaries caused by too much emphasis on *First Person Singular* as the driving force, which it never is in realistic conversations. Overemphasis on *First Person Singular* leads to difficulties in conversation development and hampers the growth of fluency. The result of the lack of emphasis in teaching the interrogative form of the verb is not a new problem for Irish language learners. It has been recurring for generations causing frustration even in dedicated students, who have been diligently learning vocabulary. The conventional approach to learning verbs in Irish is by presenting the verbs in conjugations such as:

To Do / Past Tense	Déan / Aimsir Chaite
I did	Rinne mé
You did	Rinne tú
He did	Rinne sé
She did	Rinne sí
We did	Rinneamar
You did	Rinne sibh
They did	Rinne siad

The interrogative form, the building block of real conversation, is often omitted entirely or at best tagged on to the end as some sort of afterthought. Conventions evolve or are decided upon for good reasons, but there is also good reason for occasionally turning convention upside down and interrogating a new approach.

To Do / Past Tense	Déan / Aimsir Chaite / An ndearna..?
I did	An ndearna mé? Rinne mé. Ní dhearna mé.
You did	An ndearna tú? Rinne tú. Ní dhearna tú.
He did	An ndearna sé? Rinne sé. Ní dhearna sé.
She did	An ndearna sí? Rinne sí. Ní dhearna sí.
We did	An ndearnamar? Rinneamar. Ní dhearnamar.
You did	An ndearna sibh? Rinne sibh. Ní dhearna sibh.
They did	An ndearna siad? Rinne siad. Ní dhearna siad.

Switching to the interrogative form as the starting point naturally introduces dependant forms in irregular verbs, like "dearna" in the example above. It also reinforces the aural mutations caused by eclipsis and lenition right at the start. In this investigation of how verbs are presented to students of Irish I examined a range of 23 books commencing with *Simple Lessons in Irish,* written by Father Eugene Ó Growney and published in 1890 during the earliest days of language revival in Ireland. I proceeded with examples from throughout the twentieth century to current popular texts. The majority of the textbooks published since 1960 and included here are written in the Standard Grammatical form of the Irish language. My examination concentrated solely on the presentation of the interrogative Form of verbs and therefore whether or not I believe the book to be a meaningful companion to a student whose aim is to acquire verbal language proficiency. I have concluded that until very recently the interrogative form of verbs was rarely considered of any particular importance by many authors of textbooks for the Irish language.

The objective of language textbooks is to assist in the acquisition of a specific target language, the most important measure of their success being the ability to communicate effectively in the new language irrespective of variations in personal language acumen or the length of time it might take to learn precision in language skills. One could argue, particularly in the case of *Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge - An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* that this publication was not intended as a textbook, but instead as a guide to grammatical standards. However the formation of the interrogative form, as a grammatical occurrence, does not appear to exist at all in *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil.* In fact, the interrogative form of verbs in the Irish language is ignored or barely acknowledged in the majority of the books listed above. Some early publications, while often providing very detailed information about the structures and syntax of the language, fail to adequately illustrate its use in realistic settings by any examples of reasonable conversations. This

may be due to lack of experience in the use of Irish as a medium of general communication but rather its existence as an intellectual pursuit, and indeed the inadequate knowledge regarding second language acquisition in the early 20th century. The idea of Irish as a second language in Ireland and therefore needing a particular model for learning may also have been an unpalatable thought in the early years of political independence. In my own case at school in the 1970s we were assured that as we were Irish we would naturally absorb Irish grammar, that we did not need to study it as one might have to study French grammar. Perhaps it has taken over 100 years for the realistic interpretation of the goals of *Conradh na Gaeilge* – the realization that Irish is primarily acquired as a second language in Ireland and around the world, and therefore should be taught as one. Recent publications are more likely to include at least some reference to the interrogative forms of verbs. Nonetheless much more change is needed to increase the success rate in Irish language learning and improve the communication skills of learners. A new approach must focus primarily on conversation based on the exchange of information—an exchange rooted in questions and answers. (Comments on the presentation of the interrogative Form of Verbs in 23 Irish Language Grammar Books are in Appendix 1.)

Implementing a Change in the Approach to Learning Verbs in Irish

If the focus is shifted towards the interrogative form as the starting block in the acquisition of verbs in Irish, it will soon be discovered that all the other forms of the verb in a given tense will flow naturally as students learn how to answer questions. Classroom exercises based on the interrogative form are engaging, and students learn through their attempts at communication rather than by studying lists of verbs.

Example: Commence each class with "question time" in a designated tense. Students must have been already taught that answers in Irish must be

delivered with the verb used in the question.

Preparation: Each student is asked to come to class with 3 questions prepared using three different verbs in a particular tense.

- The instructor initiates the exercise/game by asking one student a question.
- The student answers, he then becomes the questioner; he selects another student and asks one of his prepared questions. He cannot use the verb already used by the instructor.
- The second student must now answer correctly, after which he in turn will ask a question of another class member, taking care to avoid verbs already used in the exercise.

Result

- The most popular and easiest verbs are always used at the beginning of this exercise;
- If not selected to participate *early* in the exercise a student often prepares questions in less popular verbs; he or she needs to be ready, thus broadening vocabulary *without* direction from the instructor, but in order to participate more fully, thus becoming an active learner.
- All the students in the class listen carefully to the questions being asked to ascertain if one of their own verbs is being used. If it is they must scurry to create another question to ask when their turn comes up.
- It quickly becomes clear that one has a better chance at being able to use a prepared question if one is selected early in the exercise. Because of this instead of trying to avoid participation students are motivated to participate as early as possible in the exercise. They are fully engaged and the game moves quickly along.

Variations: "Tense Intensity!"

Introducing competition by creating teams increases the interest and involvement of the students. Opening the exercise to more tenses makes it much more intense. Students who become proficient at asking questions become more active in their own acquisition of the language. They listen for the verb in the question they are asked which gives them a clue about how to answer it. Their increased power in conversation gives them greater confidence. An engaged student is more open to classroom activities and less concerned about whether or not he is in the spotlight. As proficiency increases activities can become more complex.

Fun with Questions

The Irish language is often considered an integral component of Irish culture, and to many adult learners the language is a reflection of their cultural attachment, but this is not often celebrated in language teaching. Songs may be learned, and dances danced but the extent to which language reflects how a mind works is often not investigated. The art of circumlocution, avoiding coming directly to the point, can be introduced to the classroom as an added entertaining dimension in the learning process. This feature in speech is considered to contribute to the characteristics of the Irish people and although originating in the Irish language it moved seamlessly into Hiberno-English during the language shift. Continuing to encourage students' ability to ask questions is essential to their attaining fluency in Irish and this can be promoted in many ways in the classroom. One way is creating role plays based on the Irish penchant for responding to a question with another question.

Answering a question with a question.

Student A:	Ar mhaith leat teacht liom chuig scannán anocht?
	Would you like to come to a movie tonight?
Student B:	Cé eile atá ag dul?
	Who else is going?
Student A:	An cuma?
	Does it matter?
Student B:	Ní dóigh liom, ach cén scannán?
	Not really, what are you going to see?
Student A:	An bhfuil Star Trek feicthe agat?
	Have you seen Star Trek?
Student B:	Oh…An maith leat Science Fiction?
	Oh ….Do you like Science Fiction?
Student A:	Nach maith leatsa é?
	Don't you?
Student B:	Cinnte! An bhfuil an sraith Star Wars go léir feicthe agat?
	Indeed I do, Have you seen all of the Star Wars movies?

Students who have concentrated on learning how to ask questions have great success in this type of activity. Then, as they move into real conversation outside the classroom environment they are able to find the correct verb when they need it, and they show little hesitation in asking questions. In oral examinations, in addition to being able to answer questions, they quickly become engaged in a conversation and the examination becomes a real dialogue. This approach may also be used with students who may have spent years poring over books but unfortunately acquiring little conversational fluency. Once they make the transition to asking questions rather than making statements they progress toward fluency. Those who ask questions essentially control the conversation, leading to greater confidence. In addition, an element of competition and classroom activities based on the interrogative form of the verb are much more engaging than solitary study. In creating a positive classroom environment with the intention of trying to replicate real conversation, it always helps to know the objective of the student and what he has been doing so far to achieve this objective.

- What type of learner is he? How has he been learning thus far?
- Which books or methods of instruction is he using? Do these contribute to his lack of fluency?
- What is his understanding of the role of verbs and in particular the interrogative form of each in every tense?
- Is he a control freak? If so can this personal trait be used to his advantage? If he is not, can he be assisted to take on more control in a conversation?

Types of Adult Learner: The Passive vs. the Active.

It is difficult to measure the variables which contribute to an individual's success in second language learning based in a classroom setting. The range of characteristics which make up any individual will come to bear on his success as will the classroom environment itself and the mode of instruction therein. The role of the instructor includes not only knowledge of the subject but understanding how different students respond to the environment and learning tools. Some adult students are more passive than others in their approach to language learning. Whether in college working toward a grade, or in continuing education following a hobby or dream, passivity can hinder progress. A passive student likes to take home handouts; he likes to get homework that

can be completed without too much stress. If the answers are in the text book he can self-correct and feels that he is making progress. He will work toward being able to answer questions that the teacher might ask in class based specifically on the chapter or subject under consideration and he will not ask questions without encouragement. He is making progress but at a lower rate than that of active learners.

An active learner will try to communicate in Irish and attempt to engage in conversation without undue worry. He will begin to form sentences attempting to incorporate the correct Irish language syntax and will fill in gaps with English words if needed. In his desire to communicate he may use English syntax with Irish vocabulary not realizing the difference. Active learners are happy to share what they have learned informally by interacting with other learners and assisting them to converse. It is easy to teach active students: some of their attitude stems from their personalities and their genuine approach to learning. Regrettably there is always the danger that an active learner may be turned into a passive learner by the learning tools employed by a teacher and the subsequent environment created in the classroom. Dedicated active adult-learners may decide to leave a class and try finding another teacher with whom they can progress. Unfortunately in the case of the Irish language a student is often unable to do this due to a lack of teachers. The real skill of a teacher is in turning a passive learner into an active one by employing classroom activities that simulate and stimulate conversation and fully engage the student.

Conclusion

Second language acquisition is a complex process. Its success is based on the interaction of many variables making it essentially a dynamic process, one which differs for all participants. Indeed the target language itself shifts as new vocabulary joins and archaic vocabulary leaves the lexicon, and even

within any language there are variations in style in user/speaker groups based on age, demographics, education, location and interests. Speaker groups will reinforce their own adaptations, whether accent, vocabulary or turn of phrase: language learning is a non-linear open system (Larsen-Freman:1997). All of these shifting factors are positive attributes and contribute to making a language alive and healthy. However one unchanging factor is the reason people communicate: to find things out.

Sentences in Irish all commence with the verb so mastery of verbs is the most basic skill in the acquisition of fluency. I believe that the initiation point for learning verbs in Irish should be rooted the interrogative form, teaching students how to ask questions first, rather than teaching them to make statements. Competence in asking questions in Irish gives the learner power and control in a conversation, leads to greater confidence and accordingly a more active role in acquiring the language. Moreover the answer to guiding a student out of the danger area of *tocht* lies clearly in mastery of the interrogative forms, the signposts to fluency in Irish. Competing for control in conversation can be a fun learning technique in the classroom. Introducing characteristics of the Irish culture as represented by language adds a valuable dimension to Irish language learning. The early stages of Irish language acquisition can be made an interesting passage for students where obstacles can be avoided and where achievement can be measured by their ability to converse without stress.

> There are more questions than answers
> Pictures in my mind that will not show
> There are more questions than answers
> And if I learn to ask them the more I'll know
> Yeah, and if I learn to ask them the more I'll know

Appendix 1

Comments on the presentation of the interrogative form of Verbs in 23 Irish Language Grammar Books

Title	Author	Edition	Comment
Simple Lessons in Irish (1890)	Rev. Eugene Ó Growney	1923	Verbs are introduced as part of sentences. No sign of the interrogative form of Verbs.
Láimh Leabhar na Gaedhilge Part 1V (1906)	Seaghán P. Mac Énrí	1906	Little information about the interrogative form of verbs. Some examples.
Gaeilge sa mBaile (1920)	Máire Ní Cheallacháin, B.E.	1922	No information or instruction about the interrogative form of verbs, although some examples in conversation samples.
Bun-Chúrsa ar Cheapadóireacht Gaeilge (1922)	Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig	1941 1953	Although this book is described as a course in Irish composition it progresses from grammatical rules including the interrogative forms, through a reading section embodying the rules already explained and then it proceeds to a writing section. The interrogative forms are introduced in Chapter 8 in each tense section.
Réchúrsa Grammadaí (1938)	Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig	1963	Interrogative forms of verbs used to illustrate urú and dependant forms of the verbs and illustrated separately within each tense as *An Fhoirm Cheisteach*. 120 pages of exercises include a small number dealing with the interrogative form and some sample conversations which include questions and answers.
Irish Without Worry (1943)	Rev. D.A. Collier OMI	1943	Verbs listed in usual format, examples of interrogative forms at the bottom of the list. Some examples of use of the interrogative form in conversations are given at the end of each verb section.

Title	Author	Edition	Comment
Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge An Caighdeán Oifigiúil (1958)	Oifig an tSoláthair	1968	The interrogative form of verbs is rarely illustrated in this publication. It does not appear in the verb listings apart from within An Chopail. Two examples appear under the title *Urú ar an mBriathar,* pg 91.
Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Criostaí (1960)	L.A. Ó hAnluain	1985	No information about the interrogative form of verbs although there is a section on interrogative forms of pronouns and examples of how to use them. The book is pitched at learners who are at intermediate level. Perhaps it is considered that they should already be familiar with the interrogative forms of all verbs.
An Graiméar Nua (1968)	Séamas Ó Céileachair M.A.	1976	Verbs conjugated in the usual format but no interrogative forms given at all apart from a few examples in the section dealing with An Chopail *Is*.
Gaeilge don Mheánteistimeireacht (1968)	T.S. Ó Braonáin	1968	Interrogative forms are listed at the start of each tense section. No examples of their usage in conversation.
Tosach Maith (1970)	Sr. Francis McAndrew	1982	No information about the interrogative form of verbs. Minimal treatment under the heading *The Vocative Case. Questions. Asking.* In unit 47.
Irish For The People (1973)	Proinsias Mac an Bheatha	1973	No information about the interrogative form of verbs.
Progress In Irish (1980)	Máire Ní Gráda	1980	The interrogative form is introduced in each unit introducing different tenses of the verb and also to illustrate the repetition of the interrogative verb in answering a question.

Title	Author	Edition	Comment
Learning Irish (1980)	Micheál Ó Siadhail	1980	Erratic presentation of the interrogative forms. The best examples are in sample conversations but these do not appear in every chapter. Examples of the interrogative form within An Chopail *Is*, Ch 11, are more extensive than its treatment in other verbs.
Úrchúrsa Gaeilge (1980)	Dónall P. Ó Baoill and Éamonn Ó Tuathail (1980)	1992	Very few conversational examples illustrating interrogative form.
Tar Liom (1982)	Liam Breathnach	1982	The interrogative forms of verbs are included at the beginning of each verb section with an example of a question. Interrogative forms of pronouns are also introduced. No sample conversations however.
Buntús Gramadaí (1984)	An Comhlacht Oideachais	1994	Many examples of the interrogative forms of all verbs given at the end of each section on verb tenses. No examples in full sentences or in conversations.
New Irish Grammar	The Christian Brothers	1999	This grammar book does not deal with the interrogative form of verbs at all, with the exception of some examples within An Chopail *Is*.
Is Féidir Liom (1995)	Ruaidhrí Ó Báille	2000	There are many examples of questions and how to answer them in this book based primarily on interrogative pronouns. The formation of questions within verbs is treated fairly concisely (6 lines) for the present tense pg 78 and past tense pg 112.
Gaeilge agus Fáilte (2002)	Annette Byrne	2002	There is a lot of information about the language and how it works in this book but no clear presentations of how to form questions after one has learned some vocabulary. Verbs are presented in short sentences and only in the form used therein.

Title	Author	Edition	Comment
Briathra na Gaeilge (2005)	Déaglán Ó Murchu B.A. and Pádraigh Ó Murchu B.A.	2005	This is a verb book not a grammar book. It includes 267 most used verbs in Irish grouped by similar behavior. The interrogative form is listed at the bottom of the conjugation of the verbs for every verb in the book - in third person singular.
Grammadach Gan Stró (2008)	Éamonn Ó Dónaill	2008	The interrogative form of verbs is illustrated at the end of each verb segment in short sample conversations.
Basic Irish: A Grammar and Workbook.(2008)	Nancy Stenson	2008	Interrogative forms are introduced in the unit on the present tense of verbs and to illustrate dependant forms of the verb. Occasional inclusion of questions in workbook exercises. Some examples in *Unit 17: An Chopail.*

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