

**Using Speaking Irish / An Ghaeilge Bheo-**  
**opportunities for teachers and learners**

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### ***Introduction***

This paper will focus on the importance of language awareness as reflected in activities in the learning package *Speaking Irish / An Ghaeilge Bheo* (McGraw Hill 2007). We will outline how such activities are necessary to help Irish language students reflect more upon the target language and their own learning. In explaining the rationale which informed the language awareness activities in *Speaking Irish* we hope to encourage teachers to devise similar activities suitable for the needs of their own learners.

### ***Speaking Irish/An Ghaeilge Bheo***

We will begin by describing *Speaking Irish / An Ghaeilge Bheo*, a package designed for intermediate and advanced learners of Irish. It contains a DVD with unrehearsed, naturalistic interviews with more than twenty Irish speakers representing all of the three major dialects. The DVD is accompanied by a book that guides the learner in private or self-study. The book includes transcriptions of the interviews and notes and activities relating to aspects of vocabulary building, grammar, dialect and pronunciation, language awareness and culture. The third component of the package is a series of classroom activities for the teacher to download free of charge from the McGraw-Hill website.

### ***Language awareness***

The concept of language awareness has come to the forefront in applied linguistics research in recent times. The term ‘language awareness’ refers to the learners’ understanding of the language learning process and also their own reflections on the way the language works. The application of language awareness to teaching materials is a wide and complex subject. Briefly, one would expect materials informed by language awareness to direct and encourage learners to notice and be inquisitive about such things as:

- The way the language works and patterns within the language
- Differences and similarities between the target language and languages they already know
- Socio-linguistic awareness e.g. the existence of dialect and the contrast between dialect and Standard Irish

- How they themselves learn and their awareness and understanding of the language learning process
- The metalanguage of learning e.g. grammatical terminology

A simple instance of a language awareness activity is, for example, directing the attention of learners towards the various ways in which singular or plural number is used in Irish. In the Irish language, for example, the word ‘cúpla’ is always followed by the singular e.g. ‘cúpla deoch’ in contrast to the English ‘a couple of drinks’. The learners may be asked to think about and list similar contrasts in the use of numbers in either language. Some more detailed examples of language awareness activities are given later on in this paper.

What is the importance of language awareness and what is its relationship to the communicative approach in the teaching of Irish? It’s probably fair to say that the majority of recent Irish language instructional materials have been designed according to communicative principles and that the communicative approach to language teaching dominates Irish language tuition. The communicative approach has undergone a systematic critique in recent times. No one would deny that the communicative approach was a vast improvement on what came previously, but some valid criticisms have been made. One of the main flaws attributed to communicative syllabi and materials is that they neglect the teaching of grammar. In the case of the Irish language we observe the phenomenon of the learner who is ‘líofa lofa’ that is to say, the learner who possesses a large vocabulary, who communicates freely but with a marked tendency towards serious grammatical inaccuracy. No one is suggesting that we return to the days when grammar was taught in a mechanical, decontextualized manner to the exclusion of other aspects of language. There is, however, a third way, identified by linguists as follows: to make language awareness an integral part of all classroom activities.

The ideal situation is succinctly described by John Klapper in his book *Understanding and developing good practice*:

‘Grammar tuition should seek to facilitate noticing and consciousness-raising. There is a role here for both explicit and non-explicit approaches, but discovery-based and learner-centred approaches too can be very effective in developing explicit knowledge of grammar; they are also the ones most consistent with theoretical insights into second language acquisition’ (Klapper, 2006, page 417).

The distinguishing feature of teaching informed by language awareness is a tendency not to explain grammatical features in an explicit manner or to compel learners to learn lists of rules and exceptions. Rather, learners are encouraged to notice, reflect and discuss these same patterns, rules and exceptions. What follows is a selection of four sample activities from *Speaking Irish / An Ghaeilge Bheo* each of which demonstrate language awareness principles applied to an aspect of the Irish language.

### ***Examples from Speaking Irish/An Ghaeilge Bheo***

#### *Example 1: English idiom in Irish*

Inevitably, the Irish spoken by learners of the language exhibits significant interference from English, which is the first language of the great majority of learners. This interference is noticeable in pronunciation and in idiom. Traditionally, the influence of English has been referred to as ‘Béarlachas’ and held up as a cardinal sin for all learners! A more useful approach, however, would be to reflect on what English language structures and idioms are problematic. What influences from English may be described as completely unacceptable? Having identified unacceptable interference from English, what Irish idiom is best to use in its place? On pages 141 and 142 of the course-book learners are invited to reflect on this. One of the interviewees on the DVD has already expressed strong opinions about the influence of English on spoken Irish.

The subsequent activity models six sentences which feature frequently-occurring patterns of English interference. Learners must identify the parts of the sentences which are unidiomatic and unacceptable in Irish. For example in the sentence:

*Bhí mé cráite nuair a d'fhoghlaim mé faoin dóiteán.*

The word 'foghlaim' cannot be used in the same general way as the English 'learn' i.e. 'to become aware of'. Rather, some structure such as 'fuair mé amach' is needed. The single most important aspect of this activity is that the learners *themselves* identify what they see as the flaw and provide a solution. An injunction from the teacher to avoid 'foghlaim' when what you mean is 'faigh amach' is unlikely to be anything like as effective. The students' involvement can be taken further still. Are they aware of a tendency to use certain English idioms in their own Irish? If so, what are they? What English language interference have they noticed in the use of Irish by others? What is their own attitude towards so-called 'Béarlachas'?

*Example 2: Asking learners to notice patterns*

A word should be said here about the importance of the term 'notice' which has a specialist application in the context of language awareness. It refers to the learner's ability to perceive patterns in the target language. Research and debate on the concept of 'noticing' is ongoing. For our part, we agree with the 'noticing hypothesis' of Schmidt i.e. that one cannot take in certain aspects of language which have not been in some way 'noticed'. Here the individuality of each learner becomes apparent. Each 'notices' in his or her own way, at his or her own pace. Teaching materials and language teachers have a role to play in directing the learner to notice points of difficulty, potential pitfalls and points of difference and convergence between L1 and L2. The key thing is to allow learners to discover these patterns for themselves.

A crucial concept here is the ‘gap’ between the learner’s current knowledge of the language and what might be referred to as the norms of the language. A learner may generalise and be unaware that the generalisation is incorrect. For example, a learner understands that a noun which is the object of a verbal noun is placed in the genitive: ‘Ag léamh leabhair’, or ‘Ag foghlaim ceirde’. In his current state of interlanguage a learner may generalise that structure in an inappropriate manner. If, for example, an adjective is added to the noun, the learner may place everything in the genitive, giving such incorrect structures as ‘Ag léamh leabhair mhaith’ or ‘Ag foghlaim ceirde deacra’. In fact, the qualified noun and the adjective should appear in the nominative case:

Ag léamh leabhar maith.  
Ag foghlaim ceird dheacair.

There is an activity on this aspect of Irish grammar on pages 112 and 113 of *Speaking Irish*. In accordance with language awareness principles, the activity proceeds by encouraging learners to ‘notice’ certain patterns and to generalise rules from them. The learner is first provided with examples which illustrate the two different structures – one with the adjective and the other without. The learner is invited to generalise the rules of usage from the examples given.

*Example 3: Phonetic interference from English*

In addition to idiomatic interference of the type described in Example 1, English exerts considerable influence on the pronunciation of learners. A notable example, present even in the speech of highly competent learners, is a wholesale borrowing of English word emphasis. For example, where English would have: ‘That’s *my* book’ or ‘That’s not what he told *me*’ Irish uses emphatic suffixes: ‘Sin é mo leabharsa’ and ‘Ní hé sin a dúirt sé liomsa’. The presence of the suffixes is enough to demonstrate emphasis and no particular stress is placed upon them. Learners commonly omit the emphatic suffixes and borrow the English stress: ‘Sin é *mo* leabhar’ and ‘Ní hé sin a dúirt sé *liom*’. This feature is treated on page 11 of *Speaking Irish*.

The pronunciation of Irish is a strangely neglected feature across all levels of tuition. It's vital, therefore, to help the learners become aware of contrasts in stress and intonation. This should not be a 'one off' activity in the language course, but rather an integral and continuous element of the teaching program. While watching the interviews in *Speaking Irish*, learners' attention should be drawn, on a regular basis, to this and other points of pronunciation. A similar example can be found on page 38, drawing attention to the vowel shortening of pronouns such as 'mé' and 'sé' in sentences such as 'Bhí mé ann'.

*Example 4: Socio-linguistic awareness*

Learners of Irish, and particularly learners who are at a remove from an Irish cultural milieu, are frequently challenged by the reality of the language's socio-linguistic situation. There is an expectation that the Irish language should be comparable or equal to English in every domain. Surprise is often expressed at the liberal borrowing from English in Gaeltacht speech, especially in the discussion of technical or semi-technical subjects. That surprise can even be expressed as censure or disapproval. The speech of learners can sometimes be pitched in an inappropriate register. As is the case with other lesser-used languages, successful communication in Irish requires some appreciation of the socio-linguistic reality, the domains in which Irish is strong and those in which it is weak.

Achieving such an appreciation is an ongoing process which can be facilitated by the teacher and by teaching materials. Certain socio-linguistic aspects are explicitly referred to in *Speaking Irish* on pages 86 to 87 and on page 106. Teachers should encourage learners to reflect upon English loan words which occur in the interviews. In what contexts are they used? Are the students aware of an alternative Irish term? Would that term be widely understood? Such reflection can only enhance their ability to communicate appropriately with native or habitual speakers of Irish.

### ***Language awareness and the role of the teacher***

Some teachers may be doubtful of the value of language awareness activities, particularly those teachers who work under severe time constraints and program requirements. Taking ‘time out’ to discuss language may seem a distraction from the ‘real work’ of inculcating rules and information. Far from being a luxury, research suggests that raising language awareness is an essential part of tuition. A linguistically aware student can expect to benefit from the following advantages:

- A more fruitful use of time spent on private study, including greater facility in use of reference works such as grammars and dictionaries
- A greater ability to plan language learning to prioritize study of particular aspects of the target language
- Greater awareness of their own difficulties and how to solve them
- A greater ability to generalise from examples

It would be useful to discuss the relationship between language awareness and learner autonomy, a concept which is still imperfectly understood. Such a discussion is not possible here, however. Perhaps it is enough to say that language awareness is an absolute prerequisite for learner autonomy, where the learner assumes a greater responsibility and control for his or her own learning.

The respective roles of learners and teachers are constantly changing. We believe that the principles which inform the language awareness activities in *Speaking Irish* will come increasingly to the fore. In using such activities the teacher becomes less and less the unquestioned provider of knowledge and more and more the facilitator of a dialogue. None of this in any way implies a marginalization of the teacher’s role, because that dialogue is essential to helping learners become more reflective and independent in their learning and, as a result of that, better learners.