Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium:
Teaching Irish to Adults in the United States: Effective Methods

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I will be speaking today about the methods I have developed in teaching Irish to adults and the theory behind those methods. I began to teach in New York in 1997 with Una McGillicuddy and since then I have been involved in promoting Irish, not simply in the classroom. I believe that though the classroom environment is important to the student, the life of the language outside the classroom is more important. I believe that the future of Irish is in the hands of those who speak it, and speak it correctly and thereby leave it healthy for the next generation. Learning Irish never stops, there is always more to study.¹

¹I would like to thank Glucksman Ireland House NYU and Pádraig Ó Cearúll for inviting me to participate in this symposium in memory of Barra Ó Donnabháin. I met Barra for the first time at an Irish language immersion weekend in Jamison, Pennsylvania, in 1998. We were in the same conversation group and from that time he was always generous to me with his friendship, advice, and help. He was a true scholar of the Irish language, always improving his own skills and motivating all of us with serious interest in the language to do likewise. He certainly succeeded in my case.

It was always fun exploring the language in the company of Barra. Even if one was attempting to come to grips with a difficult grammatical concept as happened often in the Ryan Library at Iona College, Barra would succeed in composing amusing examples which would be easy to remember at a later date. Irish was always our first language, whether face to face, on the telephone or in email, and I am lucky to have had Barra as a mentor for many years.

This occasion in honor of Barra, and recognizing all that he did for Irish is important to all of us interested in promoting and supporting the language because, in the words of Tomás Ó Criomhthain, “mar, ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann” (we will not see his kind again).

To teach any language it is important to understand the nature of language and how it changes over time. Change indicates that a language is alive; this can be clearly seen in New York and in Ireland where English is constantly responding to the changing world. Some language changes are welcome, some perhaps considered to widen the divide between the educated and the uneducated. There are also new forms of communication which have an effect on spoken languages. Perhaps one could argue that people do not communicate verbally to the same extent as they did in the past and therefore the spoken word is no longer of importance. If this is so, is this development reflected in all major languages and minor languages including Irish?

The structure or skeleton of the Irish language is very strong, but like any language her appearance depends on the flesh provided by the speakers. Societies of people will have differing abilities and differing standards in language skills. Some will have higher standards in grammar and vocabulary; others may simply have enough of the language for basic communication. This is a fact in any language, and one which should be recognized in Irish as a good thing, a sign that the language is alive and well, rather than a cause for concern. In every living language in the world there will be those with mastery and those with basic skills; the shape of the language reflects the subculture in which it resides.

In recent years there have been books published in Irish which suit all manner of reader, from small children in the nursery through text books for university students. There is a mix of Irish language programming on television in Ireland designed to suit different audiences, from soap operas to documentaries. There are courses during the summer months in the Gaeltacht areas not only for second level students but for adult learners too. Courses are now available for adults in the cities in Ireland and in the cities of the United States and Canada — and most likely all over the world. These are all very welcome developments which indicate, I believe, a very
positive situation regarding Irish, the best since the foundation of the Republic.

Many experts will say that adult learners of a second or third language will never attain the perfection in accent that a native speaker has, but this should not be a cause for concern. There is evidence that many adult learners do achieve fluency in second and third languages and that is what we want — Irish alive and well in any community which is interested in using it, wherever they happen to be, and of course, outside the classroom environment.

Approaches

My objective as a teacher is to motivate students to move beyond basic communication skills in Irish, always considering the next level, without becoming what is disparagingly referred to as the “Gaeilge Nazi.” I don’t believe that there are any direct rules in teaching, only guidelines, as there are so many variables which must be considered. The Christian Brothers’ style in teaching Irish — “education by intimidation” and “rote learning,” according to Traolach Ó Riordáin of the University of Montana – Missoula — have been much maligned. Now many young men in Ireland were lucky to get that education; I have met elderly men who have wonderful Irish, courtesy of the Christian Brothers’ schools. Sadly, many of them do not believe that their language skills are particularly good, or of much use to them. It is often a lack of confidence that is the problem. I believe that a certain amount of learning by rote is useful in the modern classroom as long as it does not erode the self-confidence of the student. Therefore, though unfashionable, I use this method when teaching prepositional pronouns, the building blocks of the Irish language, to my students, with positive results.

The communicative approach is very popular as a teaching method in many languages. Based on classroom activities which mimic real life situations, this approach is a vital part of my teaching recipe. The objective is to learn the vocabulary which is needed in a particular situation and then recreate the situation through role playing with two or three participants. Only the vocabulary which is needed for the specific activity is learned. While this is a valuable method of language learning, I have found, however, that adult learners are often not content with the information they receive for one particular situation. Adults like to make comparisons with English, and, in the case of Irish, they require explanation of the underlying factors and rules which govern mutations in the spelling of certain nouns depending on their case. Though communication is the objective of language, the danger in using only the communicative approach in the classroom is that adult students may not progress beyond a basic understanding of the language in certain situations and may not acquire a broader understanding of how the language actually works.

What is the best way to learn a language? This question has of course a very simple answer. We acquire our first language at home from our parents and then from our little friends as we try to communicate through play. Parents are the principle language teachers and if they speak their mother tongue well there is an excellent chance that their children will acquire mastery naturally. This would be the best way to learn a second or third language; however, total immersion is not practical. In the case of Irish, few can afford to move to the Gaeltacht for a year or two even if the desire to acquire the language is very strong. As teachers, we have to develop methods which suit our students and give them the best chance of succeeding and becoming fluent in Irish. The fact is that many adults can only spend an hour or perhaps two in the classroom each week. My approach is to maximize the beneficial effect of the classroom environment by combining aspects from each of the three methods of language acquisition outlined above, in various degrees, depending on the particular needs of the group.

I believe that it is important that students starting to learn Irish understand broadly how this language works. (Then, whenever necessary, one can return to this explanation.) I like to use the metaphor of the kaleidoscope when explaining to a beginners class the ways in which phrases in Irish come together. Nouns often change in spelling depending on their case and therefore pronunciation changes, sometimes quite radically, but these mutations follow patterns. Prepositional pronouns are used with verbs in different ways from which figures of speech have developed. These inflections and mutations are sometimes hard for students coming from English to grasp. I ask them to imagine a kaleidoscope, many colorful
patterns, a certain beauty in each independently, and then they all come together sympathetically to cause a riot of color. Imagine each elemental pattern in the kaleidoscope as a phrase, figure of speech or mutating noun:

- If one goes too close to a kaleidoscope one cannot see it clearly.
- One cannot view one element of the kaleidoscope alone.
- While a kaleidoscope is working it is not necessary to understand how it works to appreciate its beauty.

In Irish, it is not necessary or even advisable to try to understand each word in a sentence. Direct comparisons with English are to be avoided and figures of speech need to be accepted rather than analyzed because analysis can cause a loss of meaning. Some students want to learn rules or formulae to use in acquiring Irish. This is especially evident in those with just one language, who find it difficult to leave the habit of comparing Irish to English behind. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is useful in explaining the character of the Irish language and helps students to accept its structure rather than constantly trying to understand it.

With these thoughts, the different approaches to language learning and the character of the Irish language, I have four objectives in any Irish class, perhaps they could be considered to be basic elements which give rise to the structure of the class. The four classroom objectives are:

1. Understand Irish aurally.
2. Give opinions orally.
3. Understand written Irish.
4. Write opinions in grammatically correct Irish.

It is important to address each of these four elements in each class, in a light-hearted manner so that the students enjoy the experience. As a result time management is also a consideration in any successful lesson and therefore a plan is essential, with each element allocated whatever time I decide is needed depending on the particular skills of the group. This basic approach does not change moving from level to level. For beginners, the emphasis is on aural and oral skills. Moving into a higher level and, depending on the requirements of the members of the class, the emphasis shifts so that the blend suits the group.

Class Character

In meeting a class for the first time it is important to understand the personality of the group and their expectations. In the case of adult learners, particularly those in continuing education classes, they have chosen to take this course from many that are available; they may even have chosen their teacher. They are often very positively disposed to the language though they have never heard it spoken in a natural setting. They may have overestimated their ability to learn the language. These factors need to be taken into consideration when conducting the first couple of classes with a new group of beginners. Encouraging effort is key, as is keeping the group engaged and somewhat entertained so that a bond is created between the classmates and they look forward to coming into the classroom each week.

It quickly becomes apparent after just a few classes that the students fall into two broad categories: those who are interested in using Irish to communicate and those who want to learn the language. The difference is clear. Those who are interested in using Irish are always willing to learn extra vocabulary between classes and come to the class armed with questions which have arisen since they last saw you. They are active learners and try to find answers to their questions before coming to class. They will watch TG4, listen to Raidió na Gaeltachta, check sites on the web, and accept the dialects. They will listen carefully and understand that dialects will not only have some variations in vocabulary, but also in rhythm. Their ears are always tuned in to sound. The only problem I see in this group is impatience with themselves, and one aspect of the job of teacher is to support this student, especially when they reach a plateau or become impatient with themselves and therefore discouraged. There is always the danger that they will stop working, like many who learn English as a second language; that is, as soon as they are able to communicate in a basic way they often do not continue with formal classes, whereas if they continued there is a good chance that they would become fluent. I encourage learners of Irish to continually...
strive to improve their language skills, even if they have done well with mastering basic conversation.

The second group of students are those interested in learning the language in a more passive way. They may be very interested in many aspects of Irish culture. They are dedicated, complete homework, but will not be attracted to working toward language acquisition aurally outside of the classroom. They may read passages which are a few levels ahead of their oral skills and rely on the dictionary for assistance. These students often wonder why their oral skills are not better, and they can become discouraged. The problem is that they have not trained their ear to the language; they have great difficulty with the dialects or even with different accents, which they sometimes confuse with dialects. One student, new to my class, explained that after twenty years studying Irish she could not speak a word, though she could read fairly well. “Whenever you speak to me,” she said, “I have to imagine ticker tape with the written words running across an imaginary screen approximately at your shoulders.”

She was translating whatever she heard into the written form and then reading those imaginary words before she could understand what was being said, and then she had to apply the same process to formulating a reply or comment. A student like this often has a great wealth of vocabulary. I explain that the vocabulary is locked in a cupboard at the back of the mind and has to be released. The key is the ear. The student must start to link the sounds she hears to the words in storage, sound to understanding. That is the first step, and often the student does not like the change. The emphasis in class with students like this is primarily aural and if successful the student can really progress and start to speak and before long become open to regional variations in Irish.

Setting the Tone

Every class has its character, but the teacher can set the tone in the classroom to make it a positive environment for learning. I like to find out a little about the group and so will ask a few questions, not necessarily to find out the answers to those questions, but to see how the group responds. Does anyone already have some Irish language skills? Is this person talkative? Who is shy? Is there a prankster in the group? Usually somebody takes on this role. I will often ask a silly question, which puts everyone at ease. The type of question will depend on the level of Irish of the students in the classroom. Examples are Cad é an rud is sine i do chuisneoir? (What is the oldest thing in your refrigerator?) or Cad é an bronntanas is measa a bhfuair tú riambh? (What is the worst gift you ever received?). Everyone can participate in discussions based on such questions without stress; the questions themselves do not irritate and the answers can be lively and encourage listening. In a higher level class, conversation between members of the group often ensues and I become a moderator, which is exactly my objective. Why are the students in this class? Why is Irish important to them? Or is it important at all? Is this class simply a hobby or is there another, deeper reason for their participation? Does anyone have other objectives?

Once I have some understanding of my students’ objectives I explain my own role. I explain that I do not see myself as being in charge of the classroom imparting information to an audience. I prefer to direct students on a path of learning which they have chosen, and to do this I will explain that the class time will be divided into four sections corresponding to my four class objectives already outlined.

1. Conversation 1: Students practice understanding aurally by responding to questions.
2. Conversation 2: A student gives his opinion on a topic, which may be prepared, but not read. Other students ask questions.
3. Reading at correct level.
4. Writing simple sentences with correct use of verbs and other grammar elements.

Learning the interrogative forms of verbs is a crucial part of developing conversation skills in any language and so many classroom activities are structured around practicing asking questions. Should a student ask a question of me, I will first put the question to the class as someone may already have the answer and may be able to attempt to give it through Irish, promoting further conversation. Many communication games are likewise based on questions and answers, practicing listening and speaking, and so I will use some...
form of communication game in the classroom at each session.
Having traveled through my classroom environment, the information I like to have regarding my students, my approach to teaching Irish, and the actual activities in the classroom, I would like to once again emphasize that what goes on outside the classroom is at least equally important in the acquisition of Irish and probably in the acquisition of any second language. I also believe that I can support my students outside the classroom in a variety of ways, such as:

1. Speaking Irish as much as possible with them.
2. Helping them form conversation groups.
3. Using e-mail for communication in Irish.
4. Recommending TG4 shows and radio shows in Irish.
5. Introducing students to Irish language singers and songwriters.
6. Illustrate to students how I use the language in my own life, with friends, blogging, and with web sites.

It is wonderful to see the interest in the Irish language here in the United States. It is especially heartening to see this growing from year to year. Some students fail to continue their studies after the first year, but this happens in all areas of study with adults, not only with Irish. An adult student needs to be especially diligent and expend much time, energy, and money to be successful in his studies, as there are often many other demands on him. As I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, there are developments all over the world which lend support to the learning of Irish and it is a very positive time for the language. Irish language events, either for just a day or for a whole weekend, are being organized, and even in Canada there is now a new Gaeltacht area being developed by Aralt Mac Cionnaith.

The Future

Life goes in one direction and that is ahead; there is no turning back and no stopping. It is a waste of time looking back to the way things once were with the Irish language. Neither is it fair to leave the care of the language to those in the designated Gaeltacht areas in an attempt to “preserve” what once was. Indeed, the word “preserve” used in regard to the Irish language is negative in connotation. Teenagers in the Gaeltacht areas will listen to their iPods and watch YouTube just like teenagers outside the Gaeltacht areas, and they may not be too concerned with the story line in Ros na Rún. Many young people will move from these areas in search of education and employment. It is not fair to criticize these behaviors. Lifestyle changes in Ireland will be reflected in the Irish language lexicon — some words will be lost and new ones will join the ranks. My hope is that the lexicon broadens and deepens in the traditional and true style of the Irish language rather than as simple translations from the English words I hope that our language retains the spirit of the Irish, the spirit of those who spent their lives speaking it and none other, the spirit of those of our friends who spent their lives motivating us all toward greater Irish language skills, and the spirit of all of us here today who understand just how valuable our native language is in our lives. So, in the words of Barra Ó Donnabháin, “Má tain Gaoluinne aghat, labhair i” or, “If you have Irish, speak it.”

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1 Ros na Rún is an Irish language soap opera set in Co. Galway that began broadcasting on RTE One television in Ireland since 1995 and is now shown on the Irish language television station, TG4.