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CALL Support in Context: Contrasting Approaches in Irish and Scottish Gaelic

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December 2014

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Abstract

The aims and products of the TOOLS for CLIL Teachers project are outlined, with links to sample materials, further evaluation and analysis of issues relating to dissemination and training, and to technical description. Particular attention is drawn to differential approaches to support material production between Irish and Scottish Gaelic. In the Irish context emphasis is placed on an immersive approach for the benefit of relatively high numbers of speakers and learners. In the Scottish context absolute and relative numbers are lower, and the rationale has been pragmatic and skills-based with a focus on community use.

1. Introduction

The TOOLS project was a transnational collaborative project in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) run under the auspices of the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme between January 2012 and June 2014. It involved a range of academic partners from five different European jurisdictions working primarily with eight different languages (though the scope of the work actually entailed online engagement with over 100 languages).

During the lifetime of the funded project the partners developed a free online tool, named Clilstore, which seeks to support Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in particular, though its flexibility means that its uses extend beyond this function. Clilstore enables the creation of media rich webpages for language learning. The unique feature of this free online tool is the way it treats embedded texts. At the touch of a button all words are automatically linked to the bespoke dictionary interface Multidict, which places online dictionaries in 100+ languages at the user's disposal, thereby enabling them to interrogate the text at their own pace and according to their own personal need.

In addition to creating and testing the Clilstore program, the TOOLS project also produced a range of multimedia support materials hosted on the project website www.languages.dk/tools to help language teachers and learners learn how to use it. These included a guidebook as well as separate DIY videos on the use of Clilstore. These were produced in a selection of the eight project languages, as tabulated below with live links to the products. (Neither guidebook nor videos were produced for Arabic.)

Table: Clilstore support materials by TOOLS project languages

Clilstore Guidebook	Clilstore DIY Video
Danish	Danish
English	English
Irish	Irish
Lithuanian	Lithuanian
Portuguese	Portuguese
	Scottish Gaelic
Spanish	Spanish

The particular focus of this paper is on the contrasting approaches adopted for Irish and Scottish Gaelic in relation to the above support materials, rather than the Clilstore tool itself. Sample learning units in all of the project languages and many more can be located at www.multidict.net/clilstore. Case Studies 4 and 10 in the guidebook look specifically at exemplar materials in Irish and Scottish Gaelic.

A wider discussion of CLIL and how Clilstore can support it, and a detailed evaluation of the program and its application with students can be found in Ó Dónaill (2013). For a technical description of Clilstore and related applications, readers are directed to Ó Donnaíle (2014).

Irish and Scottish Gaelic are distinct yet cognate languages. Both currently face similar challenges in relation to status, and ongoing transmission and use. Despite this, the project partners responsible for each language adopted differing strategies in relation to the production of support materials for Clilstore. The remainder of this paper is devoted to exploring how the particular contextual factors affecting Irish and Scottish Gaelic determined the specific choices made for each language.

2. Irish Case Study

Third level education was one of the principal target sectors for the Irish Tools Project team. Dissemination focussed on promoting Clilstore to language teachers with varying degrees of experience who it was hoped would see its benefits and become active users of existing units and authors of new units. These teachers were drawn from a variety of language disciplines, however, when it came to training for teachers of Irish this was conducted through the medium of Irish. While the teachers in question were at least bilingual in Irish and English, the decision to use Irish during training, and to provide Irish language versions of the Clilstore Guidebook and related support materials was initially an easy one as it conformed to normal, well-established practice. From the primary sector upwards, in schools and departments providing Irish immersion education or courses featuring a significant element of Irish language related study, Irish speaking practitioners tend to use Irish as their regular informal and formal medium of communication.

While this may demonstrate a commitment to the language itself, it is something that those involved are generally comfortable with and is a measure that helps to create an immersion environment for learners. This is certainly the case at Ulster University. The 2006 Census in the Republic of Ireland revealed that the total number of Irish speakers daily within education *only* in the 5-19 age group outside of the *Gaeltacht* (L1 Irish speaking area) was 388,982 with a further 50,243 speakers in the 3-4 and 20+ age group, making a total of 439,225 (see Punch, 2007, 52-3).

In Northern Ireland, Irish language related courses (i.e. literary study, applied language, teacher training etc.) are offered at undergraduate and postgraduate level in the main third level

institutions, and as an optional subject at primary and secondary level. The 2011 Northern Ireland Census does not analyse the domains in which Irish is used, however, the total number of the population who 'have some ability in Irish' is 10.94% of the overall population of 1,735,711 (http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/key_report_2011.pdf).

Although there is an expanding number of pupils who study through the medium of Irish at primary and secondary level (4,633 according to the latest figures available, see http://www.deni.gov.uk/schools_-_types_of_school-_irish-medium_schools_pg.htm) Irish is not a compulsory subject on the Primary and Secondary curricula (see http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk). Mercator's Regional Dossiers for Irish in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland provide a detailed overview on the distribution and status of Irish within education (see http://www.mercator-research.eu/research-projects/regional-dossiers/).

Professional teachers of Irish at all levels will usually aim to acquire and use the specific terminology relating to new concepts and fields of knowledge, both in terms of what they require to function in the workplace and the subject content they are required to deliver. To assist them in this endeavor they, along with other professionals such as translators, make extensive use of the national terminology database for Irish www.focal.ie. Monthly usage statistics for the database are available from the website itself e.g. 1,188,187 for November 2014. Previous analyses (Nic Phaidín, 2007, 106) have shown that the majority of searches performed were from English to Irish (62%), which demonstrates a healthy appetite for new terminology and vocabulary among users of Irish worldwide. Continuing professional development for teachers, therefore, will naturally include the acquisition of new terminology and offer opportunities to engage with and use same.

Another important aspect of the rationale was credibility, i.e. if the target user group are being told that a particular ICT solution will serve the needs of their language they will be keen to see that demonstrated practically and be assured that any language specific issues that may affect the range and quality of service available have been anticipated and dealt with. The provision of Irish medium support materials is practical demonstration of the bona fides of the Tools Project and Clilstore in relation to Irish. This measure should be viewed in the same context of the provision of an Irish Language version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp), for example. Were this text not available in Irish it would hamper efforts to use the documentation as envisaged by its authors in contexts where Irish is the chosen language of communication. In spite of the fact that many L2 Irish speakers may have better competence in English, it is generally seen as being counterproductive in terms of language maintenance to have to mediate matters relating to Irish through the medium of English. The 2003 Official Languages Act (Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla) (see http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2003/en/act/pub/0032/index.html) was designed to combat this problem and ensure the right of the public, L1 and L2 speakers of Irish alike, to use

Irish when dealing with public bodies and to legislate for the State's obligation to provide services in Irish.

In 2008 a working group was established to address comprehensively the teaching and learning of Irish within third level education throughout the island of Ireland and to produce a dedicated syllabus for Irish based on the CEFR. The new syllabus was completed in 2011 and aims to develop the sociocultural awareness and sociolinguistic competence required to enable third level graduates to participate fully in public and professional life as independent users of Irish. The syllabus and related sample learning resources are available online at www.teagascnagaeilge.ie. It is worth stressing in the context of the present discussion that all of the materials relating to the new syllabus are available in Irish only, that is to say, they have been designed for use by a community of professional teachers and course providers who have no need or desire to have the materials mediated through English. While the whole New Third Level Syllabus for Irish project represents a successful example of a grassroots initiative that would be worthy of replication in other similar contexts, apart from facilitating dissemination of the project's core concept there is no immediate need to make an English language version of the documentation available.

Far from being an optional extra or a symbolic contribution to the language, the proposition of presenting Clilstore to the Irish language teaching community solely through the medium of English would certainly limit its prospects for adoption.

3. Scottish Case Study

3.1 Gaelic in the Census

The 2011 census results include information on Gaelic in relation to both the numbers of users and their skills. The following quotations are taken from the National Records of Scotland (2013).

http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/censusresults/release2a/StatsBulletin2A.pdf

Gaelic language

> Just over one per cent (1.1 per cent or 58,000 people) of the population aged 3 and over in Scotland were able to speak Gaelic, a slight fall from 1.2 per cent (59,000) in 2001.

> There were decreases in the proportion of people able to speak Gaelic in all age groups apart from those aged under 20 years which had a 0.1 percentage point increase.

> (pp3-4)

Language skills – Gaelic

In 2011, the proportion of the population aged 3 and over in Scotland who could speak, read, write or understand Gaelic was 1.7 per cent (87,000), compared with 1.9 per cent (92,000) in 2001. Within this group, the number of people who could speak, read and write Gaelic in 2011 was 32,000, 0.6 per cent of the population aged 3 and over; this was the same proportion as in 2001.

For Scotland as a whole, the proportion of the population aged 3 and over able to speak Gaelic was 1.1 per cent (58,000 people); a slight fall from 1.2 per cent (59,000) in 2001. The council areas with the highest proportions able to speak Gaelic were Eilean Siar (52 per cent), Highland (5 per cent) and Argyll & Bute (4 per cent).

There were decreases between 2001 and 2011 in the proportion of people able to speak Gaelic in all age groups apart from those aged under 20 years, which showed a 0.1 percentage point increase.

(p26)

Census figures, which rely on self-report data, are quantitative measures which should be treated with due caution when trying to ascertain a population's real-life language behaviour. Perhaps the most significant points emerging from the broad-brush picture painted above are, firstly, the widely varying figures for oracy versus literacy. Significantly more people are content to say that they speak Gaelic than those who can speak, read and write it. Secondly, the highest concentration of Gaelic speakers, by local authority regions, remains in the population served by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Western Isles Council. It should be further stressed very clearly that, even in the Western Isles (also known as the Outer Hebrides), an individual's inability or disinclination to read or write Gaelic should not be taken as a token of illiteracy. All Gaelic speakers, with the possible exception of some pre-school infants, also speak English, and have literacy levels in that language comparable with the "monolingual" English or Scots-speaking population.

Gaelic revitalisationists have taken some heart from the slowing of the rate of decline in Gaelic-speaking numbers in the latest census figures, and particularly from the small increase (0.1%) in those under 20 years of age now speaking the language. There are a number of possible explanations for this – which may include enhanced legal status of the language since the 2005 Gaelic Language Act, and increased or intensified educational provision, particularly in Gaelic medium primary schooling. (It is also noted, however, that the census questions make no distinction between L1 and L2 speakers, and there is open concern that "healthier numbers" may mask a continuing decline in "real-life" Gaelic skills and competence, depending on how these are defined.)

3.2 Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Island Voices, and Clilstore support

In any event, it seems fair to say that the language remains "in crisis", and it is in this context that Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, "Scotland's Gaelic College", works to develop and deliver Gaelic-medium training and education across a wide range of levels, and through a mix of delivery systems, be they "face-to-face" or technology-assisted in various ways. Among such efforts the college has had a vital role in the TOOLS project, alongside European partners, in developing the Clilstore tool, primarily through the agency of its computing specialist, Caoimhín Ó Donnaíle, who has been responsible for the software development.

The Gaelic material that has actually been uploaded onto the Clilstore platform is heavily weighted towards video clips and transcripts generated under the "Island Voices/Guthan nan Eilean" project (http://guthan.wordpress.com/about/) – itself a successful offshoot from a previous European project, "POOLS". This material has a strong community emphasis, and focuses on capturing and curating samples of "authentic speech", sourced almost exclusively in the Western Isles, the most highly concentrated Gaelic-speaking area in Scotland, according to the census figures.

Alongside its content generation work the Island Voices project has sought to maintain a research and evaluation perspective (http://guthan.wordpress.com/research/). Ethnographic and qualitative insights into real-life Gaelic interactions and their affective nature elaborated through this work have informed the way the project has developed, and have also influenced the college's decision-making concerning specific aspects of the TOOLS project, including opting to produce Gaelic language versions of the DIY videos, but not of the Guidebook.

Wells 2011 recorded indications that fluent Gaelic speakers can be left feeling disconcerted when confronted with "book-learned" Gaelic (frequently the only kind of Gaelic which L2 speakers possess), to the point even of switching to English in order to keep conversation going more comfortably.

> Bidh mi an uair sin a' smaoineachadh gu bheil daoine – an àite a bhith a' còmhradh gu nàdarra – gu bheil iad a' faireachdainn gu bheil thu aig ìre eile leis a' Ghàidhlig agad. An uair sin, you know, is there a kind of intimidation into – ag atharrachadh gu bruidhinn Beurla?

> (Then I think that people – instead of conversing naturally – that they feel that you're at another level with your Gaelic. Then, you know, is there a kind of intimidation into – changing to speak English?) "Catherine" in Wells 2011, p23.

Mention has already been made of Gaelic speakers' bilingualism, one factor among others which influenced the decision to have the Island Voices project include both Gaelic and English from the start. In circumstances in which speakers might not feel wholly confident of producing "well-formed" Gaelic – particularly for recording purposes – from a "standing start", the option of using both English and Gaelic was often something of an ice-breaker/confidence booster. For example, participants might choose to "warm up" for a Gaelic recording by doing an English one first. In a follow-on research project in relation to digital literacies, Wells 2013 also reported how

Gaelic speakers might preferentially use their literacy in English in order to accomplish the creation of a spoken Gaelic digital artifact.

> It's all about time, and my scanning something in English is much quicker.
> "Malcolm" in Wells 2013, p18.

When it came to deciding on whether to create Gaelic language ancillary materials in support of Clilstore it was therefore felt important to factor the following considerations into the process. Firstly, is the mode of delivery to be speech or writing? Secondly, is the language register or domain liable to demand the use of arcane or specialist vocabulary, which might be unfamiliar or unknown to fluent Gaelic speakers? In addition, given that the original source scripts were in English (a language all Gaelic speakers also understand) the amount of work that would be involved in translating into Gaelic might need to be weighed against other, perhaps worthier, uses of the teacher/translator's time.

The original plan for the TOOLS DIY videos was for them to be created with an English voiceover, with subtitles in some other project languages. At this initial stage, Gaelic was not included, as it was considered superfluous effort to subtitle an already existing English commentary, which all Gaelic speakers would understand perfectly well, with written Gaelic translations (which a significant number of Gaelic speakers would not or could not read).

However, a decision was later made to offer voiceover commentaries in other languages in addition to English, rather than to use subtitles. This opened up the possibility of adding Gaelic to the list, and this opportunity was duly taken. While it is true that there are some technical terms used which might be unfamiliar, overall it was felt that the commentary would be readily comprehensible, especially as it was accompanied by onscreen visual cues. (For example, while a Gaelic translation of "dropdown menu" might not be easily understood in isolation, the visual context in which it was used would make it easier to assimilate the intended meaning.) In addition, in a community context in which code-switching in conversation between Gaelic and English is extremely common, the occasional use of English loanwords for particular technical terms is less marked in speech than it would be in writing.

By contrast, the guidebook presented no option for using speech rather than writing. An argument might be advanced at a corpus-planning level, or in terms of the need for equality of status with English, that a written Gaelic version of the book should be produced. However, this would certainly be a resource-intensive affair (approximately 50 pages of dense technical and/or educational text, requiring the extensive use of specialist vocabulary in a written context which would not readily accommodate the wide use of loanwords from English) when appropriately qualified but scarce staff could be more constructively employed elsewhere. The nagging question also remains as to how many people would actually prefer to read any finished product in Gaelic rather than English. To this might be added the concern that, perhaps paradoxically, the creation of "high register" written Gaelic may actually serve to alienate fluent speakers from the Gaelic development process at community level, rather than in any way encourage their closer participation.

In light of the close yet delicate community links which the college seeks to strengthen still further with the Gaelic "heartlands" through Island Voices and other work, and the benefits already derived from working bilingually in this context, it was decided at this point to accept the English version of the Guidebook as an adequate and appropriate support for Gaelic learners and teachers. This does not preclude the production of a Gaelic version at some later stage, depending on disposition of resources and any re-evaluation of likely community impact or benefit. In the meantime the spoken Gaelic version of the DIY video gives material expression to the determination to enact development strategies that are grounded in community use.

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