

How to Learn a Language on Your Own

Comhrá

Milsc

Copyright John Donahue
1999

How to Study a Foreign Language on your own

Learning a foreign language is an adventure which many adults undertake with eager anticipation but which many abandon after a short time, often in frustration, sometimes with bitterness and disillusionment and almost certainly with disappointment. Many factors contribute to success or failure; however, a bit of reflection before undertaking the task may help avoid disappointment and dissatisfaction with the results. Adults about to undertake study of a new language need to assess their motivation, their goals and select a methodology in keeping with these two. It also helps if they have a clear understanding of how an adult can learn a foreign language and what are the strategies which are most conducive to making this venture a success.

The language learning process

Learning a language is natural for human beings. Language is the tool we have evolved to know and explore our world. As children, we acquired speech, the language or languages used in our community, with such ease and speed that it appeared effortless. With children, this really is the case. We are born with brains prepared to acquire language, just as we are born with legs that are made for walking and hands that are made for grasping. Linguists and neuropsychologists speak of the brain as 'the language organ', because language is so intimately linked with cognition and all the higher functions of the brain. From the sea of sounds about him, the child extracts the programme which permits him to speak. By age 5, a normal child has mastered the basics of language. From then on, it's a question of acquiring vocabulary and fine-tuning the use of language.

But while the child acquires language with ease from mere exposure, by

'osmosis' as it were, this is not the case with the adult learner. This has prompted speculation about the differences between the brain of a child and the brain of adult and more to the point, the conditions in which the child learner finds himself and the situation of the adult.

For the child learner, the acquisition of language(s) is part of the maturation process. Just as the child must learn how to see, that is, how to interpret colour intensity, perspective, to identify objects, to tell distance, the child learns to use the system embodied in language. For the child, this tool allows him new control over his environment, and a door into the human community surrounding him. It is a source of immense personal satisfaction and intellectual growth.

Stages in language acquisition

Observation has shown that children acquire languages in discernible stages. These are usually labelled the 'babbling' stage [6-12 months], when the child experiments with sound production, working its way up from syllables to words. This is followed by the 'holophrastic' stage [1-2 years] where all meaning is expressed in one word which is accompanied by gestures and tonal modifications -- shouting the word and pointing, for example. The 'two-word' stage [2-3 years] comes next - 'daddy car' 'milk gone' 'doggie run'. These two word utterances show that the child already understands the *syntax* of English -- that is, the order in which the words must be placed. The 'telegraphic' sentence follows this. Sentences are longer, consisting of words in correct sequence with the connectors eliminated, much as the style found in telegraph messages 'mummy put book table' for 'mummy put the book on the table'. The next stage [3 ½ - 4 years] also reveals that children have isolated the regular forms of language, producing full sentences with link words, over-extending the grammatical rules to cases where they don't apply for example 'seed' being used instead of 'saw' or 'doed' instead of did. By age 5, the child has incorporated the anomalies [irregular forms] used in the dialect where he lives. Schooling will

reinforce standard forms, vocabulary growth, the appropriate contexts for using specific styles of language.

Stages in Second Language Acquisition in Adults

Educators have tried to find in the process of language acquisition in children some clue to help them devise better teaching methods for second languages for both children and adults. The methods must be different since the situations are different.

Adult learners, like children acquiring their first language, also go through a series of stages where they must work out the differences between the language they already know and the language they are learning. They progress through a series of interim stages, 'intergrammars' as it were, while this sorts itself out. While observation with children has produced a relatively clear picture of the stages in which language is acquired, although the age when each of these stages occurs may vary greatly from one child to another, sufficient observation has not been done with adults to establish a similarly clear sequence of stages. With some, the results are quite close to the language of native speakers of the target language, while others never reach this stage.

There is no denying that with adults, *aptitude* seems to play a key role in learning a second language as it does in learning to play the piano, but it is not clear how this is connected with factors such as intelligence, motivation and opportunity. Everyone is able to learn another language, but not all succeed to the same degree. But even in those of limited aptitude, other attributes can make a success of the experience.

Characteristics of the Successful language learner

David Crystal, in his Encyclopaedia of Language, lists the characteristics which usually describe the successful language learner. These are

empathy, adaptability, assertiveness, independence, drive, keen powers of application and observation as well as an understanding of how one learns things. Those who are able to find patterns in things, to notice differences in sounds, to remember things easily, tend to make a success of language learning. Especially important is the attitude towards the language being learned. A positive outlook, a curiosity about other people or ways of doing things, is a big help. Likewise, the opportunity to hear native users of the language, either through taped material or through direct contact, heightens the possibility of success. As well, the adult learner must have realistic expectations and goals.

In the case of adults, second language learning strategies which prove so effective with children often produce little if any result. While the grade-school child has a mind like a sponge, the brain of the adult is more like a dried out sponge, less able to absorb water readily.

Motivation and perseverance become the prime factors in successful language learning, factors which are not necessarily crucial in the case of a child where first or second language acquisition occurs regardless of the child's motivation or effort.

Problems Facing the Adult learner

The problems faced by the adult learner are multiple. The first is the loss of ability beyond the 'critical age'. While the child can learn to pronounce a language almost without accent, assimilate 'difficult' linguistic concepts with little effort, the adult possesses these abilities to a much diminished degree. Some people retain the ability to acquire language well beyond the limits of the critical age, in others the ability seems to be all but gone. In more practical terms, the adult's brain has been processing information using a specific language for several decades and these habits are so thoroughly ingrained that they intrude on the acquisition of the new language; the adult speaks with a heavy accent; he cannot hear the difference between two phonemes in the new language; although he knows the rule for the correct syntax in a

sentence, those of the mother tongue assert themselves no matter how hard he concentrates. Unlike the child who is not worried about sounding 'like a fool', the adult feels embarrassed about making weird sounds or making mistakes in front of his peers. Furthermore, the adult's 'metalinguistic awareness'¹ is much greater than that of a child. While a 10 year old will simply accept that something is said a different way in the target language, the adult wants to know why; he needs to understand how the different parts of the statement interlock. Adults rely much more heavily on the written word; whatever they have been taught to say, they feel more comfortable about it when they see it written down. This in part is due to the way language has been taught in the past where the written form was always stressed to the neglect of the spoken form.

A Survey of Teaching Methodologies

A number of approaches to foreign language teaching with adults have evolved over the years in keeping with the behaviourist-cognitive polarities. The behaviourists see language learning as a question of imitation, of stimulus and response. Methods which stress the memorization of dialogues, pattern drills, are applying the theory that language acquisition is a question of pattern assimilation through repetition and correction. The language lab programmes of the fifties and sixties were heavily influenced by behaviourist principles.

The cognitive approaches, in the extreme, avoid formal presentation of grammar rules attempting instead to immerse the learner in language with the hope that the rule will be absorbed in the same way that the rules of the mother tongue were absorbed in childhood. Less extreme

¹ Metalinguistic awareness refers to a conscious awareness of the forms and structures of grammar. The typical adult knows about such concepts as present, future, past tense, plurals, adjectives, syntax etc, while the child has no such conscious awareness of the nature of the structure of the language he is learning.

examples stress the creative use of language through the gradual assimilation of rules through a series of transitional stages in which knowledge of the grammar is built up gradually, much in the same way as a child acquires the grammar of its mother tongue. The cognitive approaches have become more influential with developments in psycholinguistics and general linguistic theory since Chomsky.

The method for language teaching used especially for Latin and Greek for several centuries consisted of presenting a rule and then practicing the rule through translation from English into Latin and from Latin into English. This method was known as the *grammar-translation* method. Little emphasis was given to the spoken language. The student was taught to read and to translate. Often such students could not understand a single word of the target language when spoken by a native speaker. However, for the student interested in grammatical theory or a reading knowledge of a language, this method proved quite successful. It is a method which fell into disrepute after World War II but which is enjoying a resurgence as a complement to more fashionable methodologies.

The *audio-lingual approaches* founded on behaviourist principles, grew out of the experience of World War II. Allied attempts to send agents into Nazi occupied countries were often stymied by the lack of convincingly bilingual agents. Many who had studied French or German or Dutch or Norwegian in school, had never acquired a decent pronunciation and could never pass unnoticed among native speakers. Consequently, these audio-lingual or 'oral-aural' methods stressed oral practice, the constant repetition of common phrases based on everyday situations. Points of contrast between the mother tongue and the target language were highlighted to ensure that the language acquired is idiomatic, not tinged with first language interferences. As well, accuracy in pronunciation is a principal goal of these methods.

Perhaps the largest grouping of methods based on the cognitive

approaches are the 'communicative methods'. These vary greatly from those which are forms of immersion to those which blend some features of the behaviourist drills with creative drama or simulations [role playing]. The underlying theory in all of them is that language is learned most efficiently in a context. Consequently, a language is presented using specific contexts as the focus for grammar and vocabulary. In order to communicate in a specific context, which grammatical structures are required and what vocabulary must be learned. For example, in order to ask for information about train schedules, you must know how to frame a question, how to tell time, how to ask about arrivals and departures, the price, the date, to inquire about the services available on the train, the differences between services on first class, second class etc. The grammar and vocabulary, then, are organized to make this possible.

Some Specific Methods

Some interesting names have been given to methods developed in the past decades, methods which blend elements from both cognitive and behaviourist views with elements from other branches of linguistics and education psychology.

Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian psychiatrist, developed the *suggestopedia* method which holds that the power of suggestion, the power of the unconscious mind, can be exploited beneficially. In a way, it involves a kind of brainwashing, 'desuggesting' negative attitudes which hinder language learning and 'resuggesting' more positive ones. The presentation of the language involves the use of drama and music to heighten a sense of euphoria. It recalls the fifties belief that you could learn a language by playing records while you slept.

In the *silent* method, formal instruction is kept to a minimum and the student discovers the language on his own. With no use being made of the student's own language by the instructor, he must guess at what the

teacher is saying and figure out on his own how the language is put together. The method is supposed to encourage self-reliance and independence. The teacher demands a minimum of repetition from the students, and serves merely as a guide, [hence the name for the method] while the student teaches himself the language.

The *total physical response* method stresses the importance of aural comprehension as the goal in the early stages in language learning. Furthermore, the target language is taught through involvement in concrete situations and specific activities. For example, the target language might be taught through using another activity such as dancing as the medium for using the language.

Delayed oral practice is the term used for an approach developed by Valerian Postovsky. This approach is based on the principle that adult learners can understand and recognize elements in a target language before they can produce them. Therefore, the student is encouraged to read, to understand, to build a firm foundation in grammar and syntax. With this in place, the student begins speaking the language. This sounds like a combination of the old 'grammar-translation' method with the 'direct' or 'immersion' approach.

The *direct* or *immersion* approaches attempt to duplicate the process of language acquisition in the child learning his first language. No use is made of the learner's mother tongue and learners are encouraged to use the new language from the start. A great deal of emphasis is placed on pronunciation and often written forms of the language are not introduced for quite some time. No explanation is given of grammatical forms and structure. Often what emerges is an inaccurate fluency, sometimes called 'school pidgin'.

Equally important for successful learning is some reflection on the goal, the result that is desired.

Selecting a Goal

The adult learner needs to focus on his goal in studying a foreign language. For some, learning to read in another language may be the goal. Perhaps this person wants to read fiction, magazines, historical or other documents connected with his work or research. Most doctoral programmes require students to have a reading knowledge of at least one if not two or three foreign languages.

In other cases, the target language is for business purposes or for reasons connected with a job. Many nurses and doctors in Texas and Florida, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, find a knowledge of Spanish useful to communicate with patients whose English is not very fluent. The same is true for clergymen, lawyers, policemen in these same places. With NAFTA, many business men see the need for a nodding acquaintance with Spanish to peruse brochures, business proposals, to read local papers to assess the political and sociological currents directly without relying on the interpretation of assistants.

For others, the target language is to be used on a trip abroad. The learner feels that some knowledge of the local language will permit a more intimate contact with the place that would otherwise elude them. Berlitz has specialized in phrase books accompanied by tapes to satisfy this type of need.

There are also professional language learners, students who spend a few years learning a language, then continue on to another language, often out of pure curiosity, or, in other cases, to add another 'linguistic notch' to their belts. These students in particular are interested in the metalinguistic dimension of a language, the phonetic structure, the syntax, the morphology. They are quick to see similarities and differences between one language and another. For these people, romping through another language is like a 19th century explorer on

safari, a purely intellectual adventure.

For some, the purpose in learning a language is personal, for reasons of personal development or out of curiosity about their cultural heritage. Many Canadians of different ethnic backgrounds undertake the study of their ancestors' mother tongue out of curiosity about their past, out of a desire to acquire a link with the 'old country', with their roots. Often, the goal is to have a nodding familiarity with the language, not full fluency or native-like competence.

Clearly, then, the motives which lead the adult to sign up for a foreign language course are varied. No course can satisfy this range of needs. A bit of shopping around needs to be done to ensure that the right kind of course is chosen to get the desired results.

Selecting an Appropriate Methodology

The strategies used in a second language class among adults must be tailored to meet specific needs. Consequently, the adult needs to reflect on what exactly are his goals. Is the goal to acquire a conversational ability? a reading knowledge of the target language to explore a new literature? Will the language be used for business purposes? for sales? for a promotion? Will the language be the vehicle for some other activity such as singing? travelling? Each of these goals requires the choice of a different focus in the course. Choosing a course taught by the grammar-translation method is not likely to develop conversational ability but could be useful for the student interested in developing a reading knowledge of a language. A typical university course in Spanish may not lead to the conversational ability an adult is seeking; this might be obtained by signing up for a course at the YMCA.

As well, adults learn at different paces and strategies which may work well with some will not work well with others. The adult student needs to ask himself some questions to ascertain which ways work best -- 'eye'

methods [reading, writing] or 'ear' methods [listening, repeating, speaking] "Total immersion" without recourse to written materials at the start with adults would be unlikely to produce results other than frustration. The adult doesn't have the patience to put up with lack of understanding. Nevertheless, some of the techniques in the 'communicative' approaches are useful and the immersion experience which would prove futile at the beginning can be a powerful tool for the adult who wishes to polish up or perfect his command of a newly acquired language.

Eclectic approach of courses

Courses for adults try to capitalize on the metalinguistic knowledge they already possess, that is, their conscious knowledge of the structure of their own language and their ability to see similarities and differences between their own language and the target language. Consequently, adult courses usually begin with learning to read in the new language, learning the sound system of the new language through the written form, emphasizing the new sounds represented by the familiar letters. Early texts should be accompanied by listening exercises, either following along with the written text or not. Sometimes coral repetition and individual reading are also used. In this way, the adult can get practice in saying words without feeling that he is constantly on the spot. Readings in the form of dialogues where two or more people are involved can make the thematic and structural nature of the text more functional.

Simulations, creative drama, role playing are also effective tools in the adult second language classroom to encourage the use of the target language. In these cases, the adult has already learned the vocabulary and structures required for the exercise; they may have read a variety of dialogues providing models of the kinds of statements that could be made; they may combine a series of different models in a new way. Whatever the case may be, the adult has been taught the structures and

vocabulary required for the situation and the exercise provides opportunity for creative use of the skills. As well, the student acquires a sense of how the target language can be used in practical situations. Repeated exercises of this kind over time will give the adult the self-confidence to use the target language on his own outside the classroom. Only in a fairly advanced class should the adult learner be put on the spot and required to role-play without prior preparation.

Current trends in adult classes use realia as much as possible. Genuine target language articles from newspapers, videotapes of target language television programmes, news shows, game shows, movies. These expose the adult to undoctored, unsimplified samples of the language which he will have to understand if he is to cope with normal situations among users of the target language. As well, these allow the adult to get a sense of accomplishment thereby reinforcing his efforts, providing encouragement.

Grammar -- that dirty word

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the nature of *grammar*. Many people recall unpleasantly their grade school English workbooks where they had to parse sentences, identify nouns, classify them as common, proper, abstract, or adjectives as attributive, descriptive, limiting or verbs, with their irregular forms, participles, gerunds, infinitives etc. This is what is known as *theoretical grammar*, that is, grammar which analyses the make-up of a language and tries to classify and analyse the forms.

When learning a second language, the term grammar refers to the knowledge of the forms which are required to speak the language. Hence, the student of Irish must know about lenition, eclipsis, genitive case, vocative case, broad and slender consonants, word order in sentences because they constitute the essence of the language. It would be impossible to express concepts in an understandable form if these are

not mastered. Hence, this kind of grammar *must* be taught to some extent. This is where theoreticians and teachers usually differ.

The question of grammar in adult second language courses is always touchy. Proponents of the popular 'audio-visual' or 'audio-lingual' methods of the 60's argue against any formal teaching of grammar at all. These courses make use of tapes, slides, film-strips, repetition and memorization of dialogues in conjunction with pictures in the hope that the adult will eventually absorb the grammar from the language he is using and memorizing.

Unfortunately, this miracle rarely happens. Some merely memorize many sentences with little idea of what they mean or of how they are put together. These people never learn to generate new sentences on their own or to use the target language creatively. In other words, they never master the programme of the language which will allow them to generate language on their own. They have merely memorized phrase books.

The other extreme, of course, is the grammar-translation method which was used for centuries to teach Latin. Language was taught in the same way geometry was taught, with the explanation of a rule, and axiomatic application of this rule to situations. The rule was practiced with drills in translation emphasizing points of contrast between the target language and the native language. This method, no doubt, produced excellent translators, but translators who could not understand a person speaking. The best path lies somewhere between the two extremes.

The metalinguistic awareness of adults is relatively high. Although they may not have very broad understanding of grammar in general, they are aware of how they say things if not always why. Rather than allow a student to form false ideas or incorrect ideas about a point of grammar by not explaining something, it makes more sense and saves time in the long run to give a brief explanation of the point.

In a similar vein, proponents of the audio-visual/lingual methods would ban the use of the students own language from the classroom. Again, this procedure ensures frustration and misunderstanding. While the class is the only place where the adult is likely to hear the target language and use it, common sense would suggest that the target language be used as much as possible in the classroom, but again, leaving the student with doubts and frustration does not foster successful language learning.

In short, the adult learner is a more sophisticated student than the child. He has knowledge and strengths that the teacher can build on -- he can read; he has some concept of grammar; he is sensitive to how language is used; he is more or less logical, understanding relationships and *rules*. All of these can be an asset to the teacher and should not be overlooked. Above all, the adult should not be treated as a child. While a child may be scolded for not doing his homework or for not studying, the adult learner *must be self motivated*.

A Survey of Irish-Second-Language Textbooks

The number of people who have begun to study Irish in the United States and Canada attests to the value these people place on a knowledge of their ancestral language as part of their personal heritage and culture. The interest has also spread to people who have no Irish background at all. I offer you now a brief description of the most popular methods available for teaching Irish with a brief comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each method.

Three courses for beginners which use the *grammar-translation* method are the Christian Brothers' book **First Steps in Irish**, Máiréad Ní Ghráda's **Progress in Irish** and C. B. Ó Cúinn's **Irish for Everyone**. These books offer short, simple lessons in which a feature of grammar and/or syntax is presented with examples, lists of vocabulary, followed by exercises in translation from English to Irish and from Irish to

English. The examples and the sentences provided for practice have the virtue of being plausible utterances, although they might be more useful if worked into some broader context. For learners who are using another method as well, such as Buntús Cainte or a CD Rom, or Now You're Talking [Irish on Your Own] a method which stresses oral-aural skills, these can polish up grammar and writing skills and focus on accuracy in expression explaining the underlying structures more explicitly. Máiréad Ní Ghráda's book is particularly useful for students who have completed a full year of Irish because it provides a thorough review of all essential points of grammar.

Mícheál Ó'Siadhail's Learning Irish is a scholarly presentation of the language. The terminology used throughout the book is that of contemporary linguistics. This makes the book particularly useful for the student who is a professional language learner, for to him, the jargon makes sense. For the average adult student with little or no knowledge of linguistics, the jargon is a drawback. Each chapter begins with a list of vocabulary accompanied by a phonetic transcription, useful only to those familiar with IPA. Grammar is explained in detail, with copious examples. A reading text in the Connemara dialect is given and exercises for translation from English to Irish. The sentences, however, are not particularly inspiring. They rarely sound like sentences likely to occur in conversation and remind one of the sentences found in old high school Latin books about Hannibal making forced marches over the Alps and setting out at first light etc.. There are useful charts, diagramming forms and syntactical structures. The method, though, would be hard to use for private study, although it is sold as such. For the student of linguistics, this is an excellent presentation of a dialect of the language. For the average learner, working on his own, it may not be that helpful.²

² My main objection to the presentation in the O'Siadhail book is the decision to focus on one dialect alone. This has been one of the major problems in Ireland, the constant quibbling over what dialect to teach. This regional rivalry has been the source of much controversy and stubborn reluctance to accept

Designed in the 60's for broadcast on television, **Buntús Cainte** uses the aural-oral method, a behaviourist approach. It consists of three books of short, simple lessons which consist of vocabulary, model sentences and dialogues which are to be memorized. For the student working on his own, there are no explanations of grammar, no presentations of structure. If this method is used in a classroom the instructor must provide these. This method can be successfully used in conjunction with books such as those mentioned under the *grammar translation* methods. The vocabulary and the sentences as well as the dialogues throughout the three books are examples of living speech, practical, usable, entertaining. It is a method that can be profitably used with another book which provides fuller treatments of structural topics.

Irish for Beginners also approaches teaching language through the presentation of whole sentences and short dialogues in cartoon form without elaborations on grammar and structure. There is, however, a section at the back of the book explaining the mysteries of lenition and eclipsis and a short treatment of verb forms and plurals. The book provides usable phrases and sentences for the learner interested in a smattering, 'cúlpa focal,' of Irish. These are a problem with some of the vocabulary and sentences which are heavily influenced by English usage, and some would say, unidiomatic³.

A book in a similar vein is **Cogar**, a course in conversational Irish which could easily be adapted to the needs of another course less

change. A recent article in **Cuisle** about a Gaeltacht in Cork quoted young Irish mother-tongue speakers from the area refusing to listen to TnaG or to Raidió na Gaeltachta because it was mostly Connemara Irish they heard there. It seems pointless to perpetuate this kind of prejudice by offering new students a course based exclusively on the usage of one place. The same problem is to be found with **Now You're Talking (Irish on Your Own)** which presents only the Ulster dialect of the language. One can hardly imagine a similar situation happening where only Alabama English was presented in a course or Haitian French or Nicaraguan Spanish.

3. I am thinking about sentences such as 'Tagaim as ...' to say 'I'm from ...' instead of the idiomatic 'Is as ... dom' or 'Is as ... mise'. Or 'Labhraím Gaeilge' instead of the idiomatic 'Tá Gaeilge agam'.

conversational in nature. The method is accompanied by four cassettes. The voices on the tape, however, can be faulted in that they use an excessively 'reading' pronunciation, rather than a natural, conversational pronunciation. When we read a written text out loud, it sounds quite different than when we speak spontaneously. A 'read text' is more stiff, formal, and the blendings typical of conversational speech are not made. This is a constant problem on these tapes (and many others as well, incidentally).

Beart is Briathar, a three part series for use in high schools, uses the 'communicative approach' throughout. Chapters are organized around topics with the grammar and vocabulary presented in conjunction with the communicative purpose of each chapter. Illustrations are provided showing the real-life application of the language being studied and at the end of the chapter, there is a more formal presentation of structural matters. However, the learner is introduced to the forms and vocabulary through use first and through formal explanation later. All instructions are given in Irish. As well, the readings which end each chapter are part of a full narrative which has been published separately as a short novel **Eachtra i nGlaschú**. This method is by far the most complete method currently in use in America. Designed for high school classroom use, it would be a difficult choice for self-instruction, as Irish is the language used to present all information with English injected here and there for clarification only. For the student who has spent time using another method, this could be a useful review and a means to expand vocabulary related to specific topics. The method comes with a series of workbooks and tapes to accompany both the text and the workbooks.

Irish on Your Own as **Now You're Talking** is known in its American version, was written by Eamonn Ó Dónaill and Deirbhile Ní Churraighín. The method has been used on BBC TV for teaching Irish and it is used in the Oideas Gael classes for beginners. It consists of 30 units covering practical topics of conversation in everyday life. Five 90 minute cassettes accompany the course. The course offers little by way

of reading practice or drills, most exercises consisting of role-playing and simulations.

Risteard Mac Gabhan's Cúrsa Closamhrac Gaeilge Cuid 1, 2 -- an oral-aural approach, consists of a book and four tapes for each part. Like the Ó'Dónaill book, it is based on the Ulster dialect. The book offers a series of pattern drills and repetition exercises which make this a useful supplement to something like Progress in Irish.

The first edition of Teach Yourself Irish published in the 1950's by Donncha Ó'Crónnín and Myles Dillon followed the Grammar-Translation method, explaining some rules of Irish grammar then provided practice in translation. The Irish taught was that of West Kerry and the focus was largely on a rural, farm world. There was little here of the modern Ireland which has emerged since.

The new edition by the same title in the same series by Ó'Sé and Shields uses the communicative approach to present the standard Irish that is now used in schools, and official government documents. In the preface, the authors explain that they have selected those forms which to them seem the easiest for the learner, whether the form is from Ulster, Munster or Connemara. When variant dialectical forms are widely used, these are taught as well. The spelling used throughout is the new standard found in dictionaries.

Each chapter begins with a listing of the particular communicative skills being presented. The structures and vocabulary are first presented through a series of dialogues. The vocabulary and structures required to understand the dialogues are then explained with a wealth of examples. For example, Chapter Six focuses on the weather, and illustrates how the communicative approach will select and present material. To talk about the weather, you need to know vocabulary for different types of weather, how to form adjectives from nouns, how to speak of temperature, points of the compass. As well, you need to know the

names for the seasons, months, days, the parts of the day. Some knowledge of the formation of the present, past and future tenses of certain verbs must be given. For some things, the genitive case must be used and a limited presentation is given on the formation and use of the genitive with specific nouns. The exercises in the chapter involve writing a postcard describing the weather where you are on holiday, reading the weather forecast for the coming week, and translating into a weather forecast a map with the appropriate symbols for the weather. The weakness of the book is the lack of further exercises to practice the forms, in particular pattern drills. Teachers and students complain about the 'choppy' nature of the presentations, but this is an unfortunate side-effect of the communicative approach which selects what is needed for a specific function.

Choosing a Textbook

No textbook will satisfy all tastes; all have their strong points, all have their weak points. But one may meet your needs more successfully than another. If you feel you learn best by memorizing dialogues and sentences, then Buntús Cainte is an excellent choice. If you prefer to have a mixture of dialogues with more formal explanations of what you are learning, Teach Yourself Irish would be a good choice. If you are merely looking for some handy phrases to use on occasion, a phrase book, or Irish for Beginners or Cogar or Now You're Talking would be good choices. If you learn best by learning rules and applying them, if you feel more comfortable with tables of forms and declensions, then Progress in Irish or First Steps in Irish or Irish for Everyone are good choices.

A number of dictionaries are available. Of course, the most complete are the dictionaries by de Bhaldraithe (Gaeilge-Béarla) and Ó'Dónaill (English-Irish) for those interested in the history of the language, Dineen's Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla (in the old script and spelling)

An Gúm has published a bilingual Foclóir Póca which has an IPA phonetic transcription for the words. The dictionary can also be purchased with a tape to explain the IPA symbols with pronunciation of sample words. For North American students, the dictionary's English may pose a problem as the choice of vocabulary is exclusively either Hiberno-English or standard British English.

Harper Collins publishes two excellent dictionaries both of which are more readable [more eye friendly] than the Gúm dictionary. There is a Gem Irish Dictionary and a Pocket Irish Dictionary. The latter has much larger print and uses colour to differentiate between head words and translations. The English here is international English and more user-friendly for North American students. The Roberts Rinehart publishers sell an Irish-English English-Irish dictionary which is also easy to use and gentler to ageing eyes.

A plethora of pocket dictionaries is to be found for phrases, some offering a phonetic equivalent of some sort. These are more along the lines of useful phrases for specific situations than dictionaries per se. Beware of unusual spellings in these, as, I suspect, the proofreading of the manuscripts has not caught errant letters!

Strategies to Teach Yourself a Language

The opportunity to attend classes in Irish does not present itself with stunning frequency; consequently, the student of the language will have to spend a lot of time teaching himself. A systematic approach will prove the most successful, with concentrated, regular sessions of about half an hour every day. As well, regular reviewing is essential.

Getting Started

Most people are busy and finding even half an hour a day to devote to the study of Irish is not easy. But it is essential that some work be done

every day. This must be concentrated work, that is, with all attention focused on the task at hand. It is easy to be distracted, so the half hour must be free from interruptions, other preoccupations. Over time, such concentrated effort does produce results. You must give time a chance to work its magic.

Using Tapes

Most methods today are sold with a series of cassettes which have recordings of the readings or the exercises and dialogues in the book. What follows is a suggested method for using the tapes which has been proven effective in learning foreign languages from recordings.

Listen to the taped recording of each dialogue first without looking at the printed text in the book. A language is primarily an oral-aural form of communication and you must train your ear to understand a language when spoken at normal conversational speed. No two languages will combine sounds in the same way and you must get used to identifying the combinations of sounds you hear. After you have listened to the recording, listen to it again, this time following the printed text in your book. Listen carefully to the way the words are pronounced to become familiar with the sounds represented by the letters. Underline words or expressions which you have trouble identifying from the spoken form. Use the glossary to look up the words and expressions which you do not understand and write their meaning above the words in the dialogue in pencil, so you can erase them later. You must not get into the habit of using crutches! Now, read the dialogue through several times silently to familiarize yourself with the words and structures. Note which groupings of words naturally go together -- for example, articles nouns and adjectives, verbs and subjects, verbs and adverbs. The spoken language uses phrasing, or 'breath groups' to link together conceptually related elements. It is within these groups that blendings and syllable dropping will take place. When you listen to the tape, note which words are run together.

Finally, listen to the dialogue on the tape again without looking at the printed text and repeat the procedure described above until you can listen to the tape and understand everything without resorting to your text or translations.

When you understand the spoken dialogue perfectly, repeat after the voice on the tape, then listen to your repetitions to see how closely they resemble the model. If you have a second tape recorder you can record your version of the dialogue and then compare it with the original. Repeat as often as necessary to improve your performance. This procedure will not only improve your pronunciation but your reading ability and listening ability as well.

Read the dialogues out loud. You need practice making the sounds of a new language; they will be combined in ways unfamiliar to you. Speaking a language is a question of acquiring habits. You will never be able to speak another language correctly or easily unless you practice speaking. You can practice the dialogues with someone, taking turns doing the different roles. The more you practice the dialogues and the more familiar you become with them, the greater will be your fluency in the target language.

When you understand the dialogue without difficulty, write the dialogue using the tape as a source of dictation, then compare your spelling with the text in your book. Remember that no two languages use the alphabet in exactly the same way. It will take time to adapt to the new letter-sound correspondences and using the tape as the source of dictation will greatly improve your understanding of the relationship between the two.

The exercises in your text will be based on the structures found in the dialogues and will be conversational in nature. Practice the drills with someone, taking turns giving the cues and the responses. Much of ordinary conversation is highly routine in nature and these drills will

give you the necessary practice in the fundamental structures and patterns.

Studying Vocabulary

Make a list of new vocabulary and expressions found in each lesson and review them frequently. Make yourself cue-cards, with the new word on one side and the translation on the other. You can keep them in your pocket and pull them out for a quick review session when you have a free moment. Write out sentences where the word is found and repeat the sentence over and over again so that you can get used to the word in its proper context.

It's not a bad idea to memorize the sentences used in your book which exemplify grammatical points. These sentences have been designed to illustrate a specific structure and they should be committed to memory. In this way, certain forms will become ingrained in your mind and their production a reflex. For example, to illustrate the use of the genitive case after *i lár* : *i lár an tseomra* / *i lár an bhóthair* / *i lár na sráide* / *i lár na cathrach* / *i lár an tsamhraidh*.

In the beginning you will have to do some translating to become aware of how a language is structured. No two languages ever express ideas or concepts in the same way. You must learn what words and structures are used to express the concept and note how they are different from those in your own language. You will discover that literal translations usually make very little sense. You must learn how to dress concepts in new linguistic form. Practice putting together new dialogues using your own words but following the models in your book. This will help reinforce the syntax of the new language.

As well, when you are on the bus, or walking along the street, sitting having coffee, try to recall the Irish words for the things you see around you; talk to yourself about what you see composing simple sentences.

This will get you into the habit of using Irish to express thought to yourself. [This technique is known as 'mental rehearsing']

Above all, don't get discouraged. At first, the going will be pretty tough. Things will get easier as you apply the procedures described above and become accustomed to using them. learning a new language is not a question of brains; it's a question of persistence and practice. In learning a language, you will progress from level to level. At first everything will seem terribly confusing and chaotic, insane, downright stupid. But don't give up. Eventually, things will become clear and you will wonder why you thought it was hard. This same process will repeat itself throughout various levels until you have assimilated the foundations of a language. Then it's merely a question of practice, practice, practice.

The following two addresses may be useful to you if you wish to order books for learning Irish:

The Irish Bookshop

580 Broadway, Room 1103
New York, NY 10012

e mail acmpmf@inch.com
<http://www.irishbooks.com>

Telephone: 212-274-1923 / 1937
fax: 212-421-5413

IRISH BOOKS AND MEDIA INC
1433 Franklin Avenue East
Minneapolis MN 55404-2135

Toll Free: 1-800-229-3505
FAX; 1-612-871-3358

IRISHBOOK@aol.com
<http://www.irishbook.com>

Both of these offer search services for books and accept credit cards.

