

# The Role of Gaelic in the Language Faculty

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I feel as though I'm back at school. A blank page stares back at me. "The Role of Gaelic in the Language Faculty" Discuss. Where do I start? Were we taught this? Did I have to learn it? How do you write an essay again? Perhaps if I'd been taught language in a more consistent way all those years ago I might not face this dilemma now - for in schools with increasing numbers of bilingual pupils surely it is a consistent approach to teaching and learning languages that is necessary and this is what we aim to do in Tobermory.

In fact maybe the main reason I am finding it difficult to write (apart from the fact I haven't planned it properly - ssh, keep those shocked voices down, my pupils might hear you), is because I don't think there is anything to discuss, it shouldn't be an issue.

We are language teachers and we promote languages and language learning. We are able to share ideas and strategies and rejoice in the successes of our French and Gaelic students. I can share ideas I learn on courses aimed at "modern language" teachers and in return I have learned much from my involvement with Gaelic teachers, especially those involved with fluent speakers. I first visited the Gaelic Medium Unit in Salen when it opened many years ago - our first Fluent Speakers from the Unit are now in S4 and even that short visit made me think again about language learning.

We take the Tom Jones approach to language learning. You don't know it? Are you sure? Sing along now..."It's Not Unusual.....to be bilingual", we could extend that now of course. Being bilingual is not enough - multi-lingual and pluri-lingual are your goals. In many European countries it is now expected that students will learn at least two other languages as well as their mother tongue. Our former pupils are scattered across the world, one former student is now teaching in Russia, two others are in Japan, another has just graduated, having studied Politics and Arabic (at school he did French and some German, as well as Gaelic unto S2). And where did all this take him? Well to Sri Lanka to study reptiles of course! Sri Lanka, where he learned Singhalese, because (shock, horror) not everyone spoke English and those that did resented having had this colonial language imposed on them. Suddenly S6 heard what I've been telling them for years from someone else and it may finally have sunk in.

But wait, I've heard this argument before. One of our Gaelic staff doesn't have any French because when he was at school they weren't allowed to learn Gaelic and so they refused to learn French too. Hopefully things have moved on, our other Gaelic teacher did her Higher French along with Gaelic. In Tobermory we expect that everyone will do Gaelic and French at least until the end of S2. Timetabling does not always allow pupils to continue with both in S3, but often they will pick up the language they've had to give up for a while in S5/6.

We promote languages in various ways. Our annual International Week which is run as an Inter-House event usually includes at least one language question or challenge based on the country chosen for each day. A Language Assembly began with some thoughts on why language is important from celebrities such as Ioan Gruffydd (on why he was proud to be bilingual) and David Beckham (on why he would need to learn Spanish as soon as possible). Our own Fluent Gaelic speakers explained why being bilingual was important to them, the Higher Chemistry class took us on a linguistic tour of the elements and we ended with a hotly contested inter-Year quiz on the linguistic origins of some words (the origins of assassin were most popular and no one guessed that glamour's origins lie in Gaelic). Some of the slides were used again at the S2

Options evening to promote both Gaelic and French with the reminder that, in the words of the song, "it's not where you start, it's where you finish", and that for many it is the language learning skills which are important and not necessarily the language itself.

Over the last couple of years we have done our best to promote languages by inviting in native speakers of different languages who live locally. We've celebrated the European Day of Languages and The United Day of the Mother Tongue (yes, any excuse for a 'pain au chocolat'). In fact we have good reason to celebrate. Our own primary department now has native German and Portuguese pupils and they are very good at coming and dazzling our secondary pupils with the languages they speak ("Portuguese at home with mum and dad, English at school, French on Tuesdays when we have French and I sing in the Gaelic choir"). Pluri-lingualism has arrived in Tobermory High.

This year we went a step further and made "MULLti-lingual". The senior Gaelic class interviewed local Gaelic speakers, the senior French students interviewed local French speakers and the Vocational English class, not only interviewed everyone else who spoke languages other than English, but also planned and hosted a very successful film première to launch the film. Gaelic comes through very strongly on the film and although the pupils of the Gaelic Medium Unit were too shy to speak to camera their teacher spoke at length about her own experiences as a learner of Gaelic who is now fluent and able to teach through the medium of Gaelic.

Gàidhlig is the only subject truly taught through the medium of Gaelic in Tobermory, as there are no Gaelic speaking subject specialists. However, as we have two Gaelic teachers we are able to do a bit more. Fluent speakers are supported by a Gaelic teacher in Social Education, over the last two years the Cruinn Eolas aig Ostar project has been successful in supporting our fluent speakers in Geography through an online programme and we support this by ensuring that the S1/2 Social Subjects classes have at least a period of Gaelic support.

It is probably in RME that we've had our biggest success. S1/2 RME is taught through conference days and pupils work in small groups. This means we can have a Gaelic group working together with a Gaelic teacher to facilitate, and it's had a knock on effect for French. When pupils study the Christmas story a group work with me using a French children's Bible and so we start to cover all languages. On the "Bible" day a group work with in the Language Faculty and look at how the Bible came to be translated and whether or not a translation is something we can always trust (and of course we don't trust online instant translators!) RME days are a great way for us to raise language awareness. In the Cathedral in Oban our Gaelic speakers were able to translate the Gaelic sayings around, one of our Gaelic pupils then came to drag me to the other end of the Cathedral where he'd found something he was pretty certain was in French and could I just come and translate it for him, and of course together we put my "O" Grade Latin to the test to see if there were any words we could associate with the languages we already spoke to try and translate.

As a Language Faculty we share ideas and resources. We have common schemes of work for 5-14 – so we have the 5-14 targets on the walls of both French and Gaelic rooms and are beginning to use these to try and build up pupil profiles. There is no point in having two sets of assessment methods for French learners and Gaelic learners, it would only lead to confusion all round. We have a Faculty improvement plan – some areas will be specific to one language i.e. implementing the Language in Work unit of Higher French which isn't there in Gaelic or implementing the fluent speaker courses in Gaelic, but for all other areas we share a common aim and commonality of purpose – so our Formative Assessment targets are the same for all.

New technology is also shared within the Faculty. Argyll is one of three authorities involved in the Partners in Excellence project. The early stages of the project this

brought an injection of technology into the Faculty and Gaelic benefited from this, being able to make use of the computers and Smartboard in the French room. Gaelic now has its own Smartboard and is able to take advantage of sites such as *Quia* and software such as *Taskmagic* - software that can be used for any language, but is probably not always promoted to Gaelic teachers. Our S2 Gaelic pupils have begun a link with a Cornish school and taught a very successful Gaelic lesson to Cornish pupils by video conference. The Cornish pupils will do the same for them in Cornish and it is hoped to set up an e-learning project. When the school website goes live later this year we hope to make good use of our language pages and when our mp3 players and iPods arrive, we can begin to podcast to the world in Gaelic, French and English (once we've cracked the technology!)

We share CPD – often CPD opportunities sent are addressed to “Teacher of Gaelic” or “PT Modern Languages” and good opportunities are missed. So we all went to the SCILT outreach conference where there were no other Gaelic teachers present. We had a similar situation when we all went to a conference on ‘Teaching Pupils with Asperger’s Languages’. Last year we worked on ‘Collaborative Learning Practice’ days with Hilary McColl – we gained a lot from it and this year are working to embed the writing strategies we discussed in our everyday teaching.

Although English is not part of our Faculty we have a close working relationship with the English staff who are part of Humanities and have learned a lot from them. Our recent inspection report noted the “approach to teaching **languages**” as a key strength of the school.

Before our first fluent speakers arrived in secondary we asked John Landon to come and talk to us about the challenges and rewards bilingual learners would bring. John compares being bilingual to have two pairs of glasses with different tints. The monolingual will only see the world with one colour; the bilingual pupil has two ways of seeing the world and so on. Perhaps we as language teachers are the same. We teach French, Gaelic, German, English, English as a Second language, Urdu and so it goes on. I believe we need to think of ourselves as language teachers first and talk to and learn from each other.

“The Role of Gaelic in the Language Faculty.” Discuss. Do I really need to?