

# TIP Course Conversations with Shannon C. Macdonald of Nova Scotia

It gives me great satisfaction to introduce a most interesting and enlightening evaluation of Shannon C. Macdonald from Nova Scotia, Canada, experiences, observations and suggestions apropos learning conversational Gaelic by way of TIP methodologies and in her own words.

Shannon participated on a number of Gaidhlig Aig Baile TIP Courses in Nova Scotia in 2007-2008.

She is now extremely fluent in conversational Gaelic and we have been speaking with one another for some time, discussing various aspects of acquiring and speaking Gaelic.

However, the evaluation is largely as a result of conversations we had in November 2008, while she is resident in Scotland, studying at Sabhal Mor Ostaig.

So without more ado, may I present her own story.

Fionnlagh M. Macleoid  
CNSA Chief Executive

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# **Shannon C. Macdonald's Report**

Hello Finlay,

Here are some notes from our discussion today:

## **Repetition - was it important**

Yes, definitely. And the quicker the pace the better as it helps prevent translating in the mind. Also contributes to the 400 times needed to assimilate a word or phrase into common use.

## **Gaelic only rule - is a breather helpful?**

I found the structure of your two week Baddeck class ESSENTIAL. Starting the day with Gaelic. Having an English moment to discuss the plan of the day and then returning right to the Gaelic. Also ending the day with a check-in, in English helped people celebrate their successes together and commiserate on their frustrations. However I feel it should be mandatory that breaks for tea and lunch only occur in Gaelic, or people must leave the building and go outside if they want to speak English.

## **Learning together versus competitive individualist approach with exams, etc.**

I believe that supportive learning in a group is a really important value to expose people to, if they haven't learned this way before. The benefits spill over into other areas of life, and teach patience and helpfulness, and emphasize their value. Whereas the individualistic approach results in linear learning, the supportive/shared approach reveals that language acquisition can be exponential: By having learners at different levels working with each other, huge leaps can be made amidst the plateaus; learning by osmosis.

## **Impact of the physical environment**

Creating a safe space to grow comfortable with a group is greatly facilitated by having a home-like environment that mirrors the kitchen ceilidh/visits that we grew up with. There is nothing like a cup of tea to reduce stress. Props, especially in familiar locations are also essential both as learning tools and 'setting the stage' for us to simply be ourselves and at ease.

## **Confidence building and what helped?**

Early on I had a stark contrast in learning environments that emphasized the role of confidence building in language learning. The TIP philosophy is to never to laugh at someone else's mistakes, and we were reminded every day how important our efforts in learning Gaelic were to the community.

I have however attended some sessions where they did make fun of learners or talk about people, using a level of Gaelic that most people couldn't understand. The outcome was a tense, awkward and suspicious environment where one felt humiliated and disempowered, inasmuch as we couldn't defend ourselves with the amount of language we had. This would classify as a negative frustration!!

Other than that, things that helped confidence; role playing; having the tutor provide answers with prompts, and learning as a group seeing others struggle and take risks.

It is important not to overwhelm the student by getting them to try to speak with a native speaker too soon, as it is very discouraging when this goes 'poorly', as it inevitably will. Also, an elder or native speaker who has experience with learners will be better able to support and help them in conversation, than someone who has not, and would therefore make the ideal 'first experience' in attempting conversation.

Including elders is important because they invariably express pride in the students at working to 'save' the Gaelic.

## **The things that helped me the most**

At the very start, of the first six weeks, it was repetition that helped the most. Accordingly, as a tutor I have tried to:

- 1) Weave repetition into my day plans
- 2) Introduce a theme, with props
- 3) Get each student individually and as a group, to repeat with props
- 4) Act out the role play myself for them to observe
- 5) Break the theme into manageable parts, and then repeat specific relevant parts of the role play with each student
- 6) Most importantly, at the end of the day ask 'De rinn sinn?' This again is a review of vocabulary with the addition of the past tense
- 7) The next morning, starting with 'De rinn sinn an de?'; the point being, that in order to meet the repeat 400 times and in 20 situations to learn a word or phrase objective, this is what we must do.  
Such a course of action is inappropriate with elders present, nevertheless, by way of such strategies we can in a short space of time, make great inroads to the above objective

- 8) Drills at a fast relentless pace helped a great deal as well
- 9) After the first six weeks and to this day, the thing that helped the most was to listen to taped conversation of native speakers. It is a 'positive frustration' that encourages me to persist until I understand everything. The tape can play in the background if I'm busy with something else, but I am still passively learning and improving my listening skills
- 10) A video is exponentially better than a tape. These tools reduce fatigue for elders having to come in and support a class over and over again. I think a video camera could be an important tool for a tutor who has access to one on the days when a native speaker will be attending or helping with a theme
- 11) In the early stages, I did not find learning songs helped in any way whatsoever and as a tutor where students insisted on this I did not find it contributed to the assimilation of new words into speech. Mostly, because our traditional songs have many verses and therefore are usually presented on paper, with English translations. However, once I had a good grasp of the Gaelic, I found that learning songs from my community, where there are no recordings of conversations, did contribute to learning more about the idiomatic language used locally.
- 12) I do not find it natural or helpful to be expected to provide complete sentence answers. For example:  
 An e lain a tha aig an dorus?  
 Se, se lain a tha aig an dorus.  
 Nobody speaks like this in any language.  
 I do find it more important and relevant that a class be organic in nature, rather than a tutor running through a list of exercises. Having a theme, with a few exercises and responding to situations as they come up, helps keep the format conversational and it feels less like work.

### **Number of hours that would be helpful**

Most decisively, my preference is for a full day session, twice a week as a minimum. However I have also found benefit from two evening sessions, followed by a full day held over a weekend.

In addition, it is essential to have a scheduled follow up plan for students, following a one week, two week or six week immersion course, otherwise on the last day students definitely feel worried about 'What comes next?' and afraid of losing what was gained through hard work and commitment.

## **Making students talk**

Absolutely essential. Some learners just want to listen for the first few sessions and not be forced to participate and this is okay and important in helping them feel safe and that no one will laugh at them; after all, everyone is taking risks. However, there is a limit to this wallflower approach; a particular student comes to mind, who after attending for 4 months still wouldn't participate. I think people who are reticent in this way, should actually be asked to leave the group until they feel ready to take chances (emphasizing that they will be welcomed back with open arms on that occasion).

As a tutor, with a student leering in the background and not even part of the circle led to many student complaints of feeling observed and resentment that they weren't supporting learning when everyone else was doing so. It was discouraging for new students in particular, to meet someone who had been attending numerous Gaelic courses for years and still couldn't say a word. I really think it is for the great benefit of the student, if everyone has to speak, even if it is just repeating or being prompted.

## **What did I like best about TIP**

Firstly, that the culture was woven into the classes, for example, making Bannochs or learning to knit. Moreover, we demonstrated how to honor the elders who attended, by caring for them without assuming they were helpless. This provided a context and a continual reminder of why the work of learning the language is important and relevant. It also helped us learn new ways to exist within a dominant culture that promotes the individual rather than the community; points I can't emphasize too much.

There was important transmission of all parts of the culture and I believe it contributed to mental wellness and self-esteem for all involved. The older folks were proud to see us caring about learning the old ways and stories etc. And it felt good to show them, they have so much worth and knowledge, despite not always having formal education. These friendships continue outside the class, and students have helped elders with their groceries, doctors appointments, bringing in firewood, etc. Tremendously important in building good long term relationships and the foundation of all strong communities.

## **Breakthrough points**

It is really important for tutors to remember that students will break through to understanding the language much earlier than speaking it. Equally essential is to praise students for reaching this significant stage in learning Gaelic.

Personally speaking, at the end of two weeks full time immersion (with a lot of extra work outside class) I was able to communicate my meaning in many everyday situations. From that point on, each day was challenging but full of new successes and the language seemed to be flooding in. At the end of six weeks I could hold a reasonable conversation, albeit still with mistakes on many topics, using only an occasional English word.

After the six weeks, there have been many frustrating plateaus and the learning pace contrasts greatly with the flood of successes from the earlier period. Now it is a new word here or there, polishing the pronunciation etc. I feel that there is a huge gap in follow up for those students who have come to functional fluency. However, they are the most motivated learners and should really be rewarded with courses developed just for them.

It is endlessly frustrating to have just the one option, of returning to another immersion course, where one has more language than the other students. This often means being asked to take on a tutor-assistant role and while this role is valuable, it is certainly not enough to motivate one to attend every day, trying to glean more Gaelic fluency.

## **Work outside the course**

Another student and I were highly motivated, I think because of our community context and the sense of urgency and obligation we felt. It is good to remember not to expect other students to work as hard as we did. We only spoke Gaelic to each other, as painful as it was, in our free time, during our drives to courses and on the phone. While I had a lot more Gaelic than her at the start, very soon she caught up and this demonstrated the osmotic effect of just being around speakers with varying levels of Gaelic. It also illustrated the importance of developing patience, which in turn reminded me that many folks had been patient with me in the past.

We had little rituals, like always listening to recordings of TIP sessions while doing the dishes; that was a rule. We drove to any and every session we could get too, attending three courses at the same time running in different communities. We went visiting our Gaelic relative at least once a week, always bringing her a treat and doing housework during our visit.

Having a buddy like this made a tremendous difference; especially when I was feeling discouraged she would usually be feeling okay and vice versa. We kept each other's spirits up and reminded ourselves of low points we had gotten through before. We cried together and celebrated together. In hindsight, this relationship probably made the difference and made the successes even more valuable.

### **One last thing**

As a student, it was really valuable in the early phase, to hear the tutor just talk naturally with a big dose of Gaelic at the start of each class, or telling a story at the end. It provided an opportunity to hear the natural rhythm of the language, instead of the usual fragments. In addition and as our understanding grew, **it was a way to measure our own success.**

Even better and crucial in my opinion, is to hear two tutors or a tutor and an elder having an actual conversation together and letting the students just listen in. Not a role play, but just talking. It is unfortunately true in Cape Breton that we don't overhear Gaelic conversation any more and in hearing, it helped us greatly to see the language come to life.

That's it for now!!!

Thanks Finlay

Shannon

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