

## Report on the Comasan Labhairt ann an Gàidhlig workshop, to train teachers of Scottish Gaelic in the use of CEFR-based diagnostic scales

Two two-day workshops funded by EALTA, with additional support from the Glasgow University School of Humanities Research Incentivisation Fund, were held at Glasgow University in December 2016. These workshops were a crucial stage in the *Comasan Labhairt ann an Gàidhlig/Gaelic Proficiency* (CLAG) project, funded by the Scottish Funding Council, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the University of Glasgow. CLAG aims to develop a series of oral proficiency scales linked to the CEFR for adult learners of Scottish Gaelic. More information about CLAG is available [here](#). Although only one workshop was initially planned, it was not possible to organise two consecutive days suitable for all participants: as such, two separate two-day workshops, each covering the same content, were held instead. These took place on December 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup>, and December 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> 2016; there were five participants at the first workshop, and four at the second.

The workshops were led by Dr Nicola Carty, and were attended by teachers of Scottish Gaelic to adults. Also in attendance was a member of staff from LearnGaelic.scot, a website hosted by the BBC which offers information about Gaelic learning opportunities and learning resources to adults. Participants were invited to attend based on their profiles and well-established roles in the Gaelic learning community.

The workshops had three objectives:

1. Identify how teachers define proficiency, and which proficiency dimensions (e.g. accuracy, pronunciation) are most important to them.
2. Establish what changes, if any, teachers would suggest to CEFR scales in their current format.
3. Use the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR* to train participants in using CEFR-based proficiency scales.

### Pre-workshop activities

One week before the workshop, participants were asked to read CUP (2013), and North (2014: 8-11). They were also invited to access training materials on the CEFTTrain website, although none of the participants had the opportunity to complete this task.

### Workshop activities

#### Day 1

Before beginning the workshop activities proper, participants were introduced to CLAG and the project aims. Following this introduction, participants were divided into small groups and asked to discuss their views on the idea of *oral proficiency* in Gaelic. Features of proficiency identified as important included:

- The use of colloquialisms and idioms
- Wide range of structures and vocabulary
- Good accent and pronunciation
- Use of conversational fillers and discourse markers

- Command of different registers
- Appropriate speech rate and intonation
- Accuracy

It is interesting to note that some of these results correspond to findings from the *Dlùth is Inneach* project investigating attitudes towards the standardisation of Gaelic (Bell, McConville, McLeod & Ó Maolalaigh 2014).

For the next activity, participants were asked to rate four audio-recorded performances on a four-point scale ranging from Beginner to Expert. Two of the performances had been recorded during the data-collection stage of CLAG; the other two performances were recorded specifically for the workshop and were heavily manipulated to draw participants' attention to jagged learner profiles and the complexities of assessment. The first manipulated performance was that of a native Gaelic speaker reading an article from a Gaelic magazine into which a large proportion of English words had been inserted to replace the Gaelic. Although English-Gaelic code-switching is very common, the volume of English words inserted into this text was unusually high. As such, this performance exemplified a speaker with a good command of a formal Gaelic register and nativelike pronunciation, but a very limited Gaelic lexicon. The second manipulated performance was of a highly proficient Gaelic learner reading an English-language text from *The Guardian* translated into Gaelic using Google Translate. As Google Translate for Gaelic is relatively new, the standard of translation is not high. This performance exemplified a speaker with excellent pronunciation, a good range of vocabulary, but a very poor mastery of syntax. Participants found the assessment of these two performances particularly challenging, but all agreed that the activity was very useful in helping them establish learners' strengths and weaknesses in individual performances.

Following this assessment activity, the groups focused in greater detail on the two performances recorded for CLAG, using the materials developed for Saito, Trofimovich & Isaacs (2015). The comprehensibility scale developed for that study was modified slightly to contain examples and information relevant to Gaelic, and can be seen in the appendix. Participants rated the speakers for each measure on the scale using an anonymous, electronic voting system. After this exercise, the group discussed each measure to establish its importance in the context of Gaelic; accentedness, accuracy, discourse richness, and speech rate were considered the most important measures; discourse cohesion and word stress were considered the least important.

In the final part of the day, participants were given an overview of the CEFR. This was followed by a presentation and discussion of CEFR Tables 1 and 3, and the table describing Phonological Control (CEFR p. 117) .

## Day 2

On day 2, we reviewed the key points from day 1, and then began the familiarisation activities from the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR*: participants carried out Manual Chapter 3, activity d) individually, and activity f) in small groups. Participants found these activities very straightforward, and there were only one or two confusions between adjacent levels in each group.

We then accessed videotaped recordings of learners of English from the [CIEP website](#). English recordings were used because there are as yet no benchmarked performances available for Gaelic. These recordings were taken from Levels A2 to C1 were illustrated with the performances by Lucas and Marc, Audrey and Mathilde, and Paul and Charlotte. Participants were given the comments on

the assigned levels for each pair before watching the performances so they could read through the comments and get a better grasp on why these particular levels were assigned. We then carried out activity i) using Annabelle and Xavier (C1/C2), Amélie and Theo (B1), Tifaine and Clara (A1), and Sylvia and Paul (B2).

The final task of the workshop was assessing audio recordings of Gaelic learners that had been collected at an earlier stage in the CLAG project. After each of six performances, participants were asked to use Tables 1 and 3, and the table for phonological control to assess the speaker's performance. Again, YACRS was used to ensure that participants were not influenced by each other's assessments. Assessments were not always unanimous; however, where there was disagreement, this was usually within adjacent bands. A group discussion was held after rating each performance, after which ratings usually converged. Where this was not the case, it was agreed each time that this was due to differences in raters' individual impressions, rather than disagreement over the interpretation of descriptors.

## Feedback

Following the workshop, participants were asked to complete an anonymous survey using SurveyMonkey on their impressions of the workshop. Seven of the nine participants completed this four-question survey. Feedback was very positive, with all respondents choosing the most favourable score for the questions:

1. How useful was this workshop?
2. How interesting was this workshop?
3. Did you learn more about the CEFR?

All respondents also stated that they would use what they had learned in the workshop in their own teaching practice. Further comments on the workshop include:

Chòrd an dà latha trèanaidh gu mòr rium agus tapadh leat fhèin airson na dh'ionnsaich mi.  
*I greatly enjoyed the two training days and thank you for all that I learned.*

Ceud taing airson dà latha air leth inntinneach agus feumail.  
*Many thanks for two extremely interesting and useful days.*

Bha e uabhasach feumail a bhith a' feuchainn ris an luchd-labhairt a mheasadh, agus thug e orm meòrachadh air na dòighean-measaidh a bha mi a' cleachdadh thuige seo.  
*Trying to assess the speakers was extremely interesting, and it made me think about the assessment methods I was using until now.*

## Next steps

Workshop participants will now be asked to assess the performances of learners and native speakers of Gaelic collected for the CLAG project. The assessment will be carried out online and will use the rating scales presented during the workshop. Raters' comments on the CEFR scales in their current form, and their own views on Gaelic proficiency will be incorporated into the proficiency scales that are to be the final outcome of CLAG. The CLAG team is extremely grateful for the support received from EALTA.

## References

Bell, Susan, Mark McConville, Wilson McLeod & Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh. 2014. *Dlùth is Inneach: Linguistic and institutional foundations for Gaelic corpus planning*. Inverness: Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

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## Appendix

### Modifications to Saito et al. 2015

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#### A. Overall Judgment

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##### Comprehensibility

This term refers to how much effort it takes to understand what someone is saying. If you can understand with ease, then a speaker is highly comprehensible. However, if you struggle and must listen very carefully, or in fact cannot understand what is being said at all, then a speaker has low comprehensibility.

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##### Accentedness

This refers to how much a speaker's speech is influenced by his/her native language and/or is coloured by other non-native Gàidhlig features.

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#### B. Speech Measures

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##### Vowel and consonant errors

This refers to errors in individual sounds. For example, perhaps somebody says "cuideachd" but you hear a "t" sound at the end, instead of a "k" sound. This would be a consonant error. If you hear someone say "bean" but you hear an "ee" sound rather than an "eh" sound, that is a vowel error. Another error in this category occurs when preaspiration is omitted, or included where it would not be expected. *Preaspiration* refers to the whispery "h" sound you find between vowels and some consonants, e.g. "bata", "cupa". A final example of a vowel error is where we're missing a helping vowel where we expect to find it, e.g. for "marbh", we might have "marv" instead of "marav". You may also hear sounds missing from words, or extra sounds added to words. These are also consonant and vowel errors.

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##### Word stress

Gaelic words are almost always stressed on the first syllable. When the stress falls on the second syllable, this is often indicated in writing by using a hyphen, e.g. "a-mach" "a-màireach" (but also "an sin" "an seo"), ball-coise, uisge-beatha. If you hear stress being placed on the wrong syllable, or you hear equal stress on all of the syllables in a word, then there are word stress errors.

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##### Intonation

Intonation can be thought of as the melody of a language. It is the natural pitch changes that occur when we speak. For example, you may notice that when you ask a question in English with a yes/no answer, your pitch goes up at the end of the question. This is true for lots of languages, but not Gaelic!

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Intonation in Gaelic sentences usually falls in statements and questions. Take a look at these examples from [www.akerbeltz.org](http://www.akerbeltz.org):



Rhythm	Gaelic rhythm often refers to alternations between longer and louder syllables when you have a long vowel, and shorter and quieter syllables when you've got a short vowel. Contrast, for example, "màthair" with "m' athair", or "teth" with "tè".
Speech rate	Speech rate is simply how quickly or slowly someone speaks. Speaking very quickly can make speech harder to follow, but speaking too slowly can as well. A good speech rate should sound natural and be comfortable to listen to.

### C. Vocabulary, grammar, and discourse

Lexical appropriateness	This dimension refers to the appropriateness of the vocabulary words used by the speaker. If the speaker uses incorrect or inappropriate words, including words from the speaker's native language (where these are not commonly used in Gaelic), lexical accuracy is low. On the other hand, lexical accuracy is high if the speaker has all the lexical items required to accomplish the speaking task and does so using frequently-used and/or precise lexical expressions.
Lexical richness	This dimension also refers to the vocabulary used by the speaker. What is important here, however, is how sophisticated this vocabulary is, taking into account the demands of the speaking task. If the speaker uses a few simple, unnuanced words, the speech lacks lexical richness. However, if the speaker's language is characterized by varied and sophisticated uses of Gaelic vocabulary, the speech is lexically rich.
Grammatical accuracy	This refers to the number of grammar errors that the speaker makes, including errors in word order and word forms, e.g. "Mi tha sgìth" instead of "Tha mi sgìth"; "Tha mo bràthair an seo" instead of "Tha mo bhràthair an seo". The second example is an example of a <i>morphophonological</i> error. This

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	means that it deals with a sound change triggered by a change in the form of the word. It might be possible to consider an error like “mo bràthair” to be a consonant error. However, because this error is an issue to do with <i>grammar</i> rather than just <i>pronunciation</i> , we’re treating it as a grammatical inaccuracy.
Grammatical complexity	This dimension is about the complexity and sophistication of the speaker’s grammar. If the speaker uses basic, simple or fragmented structures or sentences, grammatical complexity is low. Grammatical complexity is high if the speaker uses elaborate and sophisticated grammar structures.
Discourse richness	This dimension describes how rich and sophisticated the speaker’s narrative is. Low discourse richness refers to a simple, unnuanced, bare narrative which lacks sophisticated ideas or details. However, if the speaker produces several distinct ideas or details, so that the discourse sounds developed and sophisticated, discourse richness is high.
Discourse cohesion	This dimension refers to the extent to which the speaker’s use of discourse markers (e.g., “an uairsin,” “sa cheud dol a-mach”), or words or expressions that link together sentence strings in a logical sequence, makes what they’re saying easy to follow. If the speaker does not use cohesive devices at all or they are not used effectively, cohesion is low. If, on the other hand, the speaker uses appropriate cohesive devices at logical junctures to string together ideas, cohesion is high.

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