

## *An Cùrsa Comais* *Ionnsachadh air a' chùrsa*

*An Cùrsa Comais* is an immersion-based language course taught at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. It forms the learners route of the first year of the college's degree programme. Students who complete the course successfully may continue to Year Two or exit with a Certificate of Higher Education.

*An Cùrsa Comais* is essentially a grammar course explored in the practical and this aim is realised in an intensive language-immersion classroom environment in which tutors employ teaching methodologies designed to draw out speech. This is backed up in non-class time by self-directed study based on self-assessing worksheets. You will be encouraged to supplement that activity by accessing sources such as books, articles and publications, radio and tv broadcasts, and above all by being pro-active in choosing Gaelic to communicate with other speakers of the language in social situations. The guiding philosophy is that 'language is action' and that the college community and surroundings provide the setting in which to put that philosophy into practice.

Due to the course's practical dimension, class contact-time at about 20 hours a week is higher than might be deemed normal for university-level study. In this, it has something in common with applied subjects such as engineering or medicine. However, the main thing to consider with regard to learning is that, whether you choose accommodation on- or off-campus, you should think of the 100 or so (waking) hours a week spent *outside* the language classroom as development time in which to maximise your exposure to Gaelic, through speech in particular.

Communicating through language is a core human function which, in spite of its academic packaging and associations with adult second-language learning, appears in the first instance early in the life of every child. Our abilities in speech emerge not long after the basic survival skills of breathing and walking. From that point of view, you are already equipped with the learning mechanism required to learn a new language. Furthermore, you will go about it in a setting which is much the same, albeit it in an adult context, as the one in which you came to fluency the first time round: a social environment based around people and communication. The SMO complex offers a real-world location to enable this in that Gaelic is the language through which college business and routines are carried out. The conscientious will view every social interaction which college life presents, from mundane matters such as buying food or stationery to more complex negotiations with academic or administrative staff, as an opportunity to practise speaking or writing in Gaelic.

Success in the specific context of lessons and classes requires that you be an unfailing attender and a keen exponent of the course mission which is to carry your language development forward through practice and participation. Gaelic is the medium of all communication in the classroom, from incidental chat to formal instruction to collaboration in group and pair work in the structured communication exercises which form the practical basis of each lesson. A group-centred approach with its oral exercises and grammar games favours those who are un-self-conscious by disposition and who interact easily with others in a general atmosphere of improvisation and of doing things by trial-and-error. You will get the most out of the course by being determined not to allow the impulse to 'have a go' be overcome by too much anxiety about 'getting it wrong'.

## *An Cùrsa Comais*

### *Ionnsachadh air a' chùrsa*

In addition to adopting a participative attitude, you must present yourself to some extent as a linguist. There is a formal element to the learning which requires that you be able to analyse structure and grammar and to develop your Gaelic accordingly, for example to produce higher language registers. This could be said to be the course's academic backbone and a scholarly and forensic approach is to be taken in forging literacy skills.

From a more pastoral or sociological outlook, a covert course aim is to create the 'person' or the 'citizen' through the experience of taking part in the programme. Over months of immersion - language use being heavily integrated in the *process* of learning as well as being the *product* of learning - you would hope to begin to self-identify as a 'Gaelic speaker', and to have gone beyond seeing yourself merely as a 'learner'. Gaelic becomes an instrument you use broadly to function and you will form the bonds which speakers, be they monoglot or otherwise, will form with one another in any language. This is normally accompanied by the sense that it would be strange and unusual to speak a different language - English, for example - to certain others, even if it should be for you a common tongue. Students on this course tend not to come out at the other end feeling that Gaelic is restricted to the narrow domain of a performance act. It differs in that respect from language programmes in the UK school system in which the above could still be said to be a typical outcome.

However, the notion that all students will buy into this language-active philosophy isn't to be taken for granted. For some, while at the early or intermediate stages of learning, the stakes are high in terms of maintaining social status, and a need to be articulate and interesting around others can undermine their Gaelic objectives. There is a risk for those who are reticent in this regard of failing to build the important language bonds with friends and colleagues which normalise the Gaelic they're learning in social contexts, and this places obstacles on the path to fluency.

Tutors don't have to follow people around or carry out secret recordings to work out into which of the various camps members of the class fall. If you are not susceptible to the learner's complex described above, you will from the outset begin to see your vocabulary of words and idiomatic expressions expand, feel comfortable in your skin and generally present yourself what in the realm of sport would be termed match-fit in class. Over the months of the programme, you will experience the satisfaction of seeing your personality emerge in the new language. Above all, you will have acquired the learning skills with which to continue towards your goal of becoming a confident - and employable - Gaelic speaker. It goes without saying that in terms of formal achievement this approach to self-development delivers its own rewards and those who adopt it will typically post grades of 'A' or 'B' in the six modules which comprise the course. Single-mindedness and dedication with respect to all of the above will furnish you on leaving with linguistic competences which should match the criteria set out for the later years of a degree programme or a professional Gaelic post.