

Sharing voices, sharing languages: an update on Guthan nan Eilean – Island Voices

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Abstract

This article describes recent activity on the Guthan nan Eilean (Island Voices) website. The website, part of a language capture and curation project in the Hebrides, has developed over the past eight years to host a growing collection of free open access materials in Gaelic and English and other community languages.

The *Language Issues* special edition of summer 2016 focused on community languages. In his article, 'Sharing Gaelic Voices', Gordon Wells recalled the introduction of the 'C' in NATECLA – for community languages – in 1988, and the commitment of ESOL professionals to recognise 'the value of bilingualism and genuine cultural diversity' (Wells, 2016).

Gordon's article described community languages practices in relation to Gaelic and Island Voices/Guthan nan Eilean – a language capture and curation project in the Hebrides, exploiting the opportunities afforded by new technologies and social media, to involve members of the Hebridean island communities in developing articles and materials in English and Gaelic.

The Guthan nan Eilean website has developed over the past eight years and now hosts a growing collection of free open access materials – video clips in Gaelic and English with transcripts for learners and teachers and other interested readers. The technology is easy to use, and once the site was populated with sample materials created by project organisers, members of the islands' communities began to add their own voices and further develop the collection, using the templates provided. It has been a successful instance of speakers from local communities taking a pro-active and productive role alongside the language researchers (Wells, 2016).

Research

The project maintains a research and reporting perspective, particularly in relation to language learning, bilingualism, and languages and digital media. The research section of the website documents the developing context in which the project has been operating and describes how the project has responded to this context.

The first Soillse Small Research Fund project was completed in 2011, the second in 2013, and the third in 2017. The chapter on Island Voices for the British Council book, "Innovations in English Language Teaching for Migrants and Refugees" was completed in 2012. The TOOLS report

on CALL support draws substantially on Island Voices work in relation to Gaelic, and was completed in December 2014. To find these research papers and for more on the project's research activity, go to <https://guthan.wordpress.com/research/>

Mother tongues and other tongues

The project has consistently maintained a positive stance on the potential benefits of engaging with more than one language. From the beginning Guthan nan Eilean has been a “more than monolingual” project. It is in this context that a new page for “Other Tongues” has been created on the site, where videos in languages other than English and Gaelic, voiced by contributors near and far, are gathered in one place – so far, Basque, Irish, Japanese, Manx, Polish, Scots, Urdu and Welsh. The project is actively seeking contributions in other languages – contact Gordon Wells to find out how to take part.

One person's “mother tongue” will be somebody else's “other tongue”

Gordon acknowledges that the project is small and ‘the production of a few extra videos may have little material impact’ (Wells, accessed December 2017) but even a small project may contribute to the development of more open mindsets about language and identity.

“No doubt, there are powerful forces at work and complex issues at stake wherever languages are in contact, and the production of a few extra videos may have little material impact of itself on a tangled web of interlocking competences, loyalties, and social and economic pressures. But even if we are just reminded for a moment that one person's “mother tongue” will be somebody else's “other tongue”, and vice-versa, then we may be contributing in some way to the development of a more open mindset and a willingness to question previously narrower, maybe even “monolingual”, lines of thinking, whether that be at policy-making or community level, or indeed within ourselves”.

Gordon Wells, accessed December 2017

<https://guthan.wordpress.com/2017/07/11/mother-tongues-and-other-tongues/>

Go to the website to view the materials: <https://guthan.wordpress.com>

Take part in the project contact Gordon Wells on gne@smo.uhi.ac.uk

References

Wells, G. (2016) ‘Sharing Gaelic Voices’ *Language Issues* 27/1: 56