SOILLSE

Perceptions of Gaelic Learning and Use in a Bilingual Island Community:
an Exploratory Study

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Contents

Abstract

This study elicits and documents a range of views in the Uists, in the Outer Hebrides, among community members with an interest in Gaelic, both speakers and would-be speakers. Particular attention is paid to perceptions in relation to bilingualism and literacy, and their possible impact on willingness to converse in Gaelic. Feelings of some ambivalence in these areas may result in underconfidence in speaking. Prevalent bilingual code-mixing also raises questions of definition and acceptability. Interaction between fluent speakers and learners makes demands of the former which may not be generally acknowledged. Successful learners develop strategies for community engagement in Gaelic, in a context where fluent speakers are generally well disposed to help to the extent that they feel able. A process of positive re-evaluation of existing bilingual skills may help raise consciousness and boost confidence in both learners and fluent speakers, so stimulating increased use and learning of Gaelic in a range of community contexts.

1. Introduction

This research has been conducted on a partnership basis between Cothrom Ltd, the community-based training group in South Uist, and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO), Scotland's Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye, supported by the Small Research Fund of Soillse, the inter-university Gaelic research network.

The study was developed and conducted over the first six months of 2011 in the island group of North and South Uist and Benbecula. The principal researcher was myself, Gordon Wells, Benbecula-based Projects Officer for SMO, with advice from Professor Richard Johnstone of the Soillse project team.

1.1 Broad Context

A brief sketch of the wider context of Gaelic learning and use may help to set the scene for the detailed work of this project and the motivating factors behind its establishment. While this is not a quantitative study, it is widely recognised, and attested in census data, that the Western Isles retain the highest proportions of Gaelic speakers on a percentage basis of any communities in Scotland. Table 1 shows census returns for the study area, adapted from McEwan-Fujita's (2010b, p26) extrapolation from the 2001 Census, Table UV12, General Register for Scotland.

Table 1. Number of Gaelic speakers living in the study area

	Total population with Gaelic-speaking ability	Total population	Percentage of Gaelic speakers
North Uist, Berneray, and Grimsay	1115	1657	67.3
Benbecula	701	1249	56.1
South Uist and Eriskay	1390	1951	71.2
Total for the Uists	3206	4857	66.0

It is also recognised that this is a diminishing strength as the numbers of monolingual English speakers continue to rise. Numerous studies have recorded and analysed the implications in numerical terms (eg Mackinnon, 2006).

At the same time Gaelic speakers, learners, and enthusiasts are also scattered across Scotland, and further afield, with significant clusters congregating in major conurbations such as Glasgow or Edinburgh, although as a proportion of the wider population of these cities they remain very small groupings. Nevertheless there is a distinct awareness of Gaelic at a national level, evidenced in the media (for example through a dedicated Gaelic TV channel), in political debate and governmental structures (through the Gaelic Language Act of 2005 conferring parity of esteem with English, and through Bòrd na Gàidhlig, charged with planning and overseeing national development of the language), and in educational provision (for example "Gaelic-medium" schooling in mainland centres as well as in the Hebrides).

Insofar as the ongoing vitality of Gaelic is dependent on, or responsive to, planned and resourced policies and actions this national context is very important even in the Hebrides, as it is mainly mainland-based bodies that set the broad parameters within which monies are distributed to achieve particular goals. It is not the aim of this research project to offer a detailed discussion of Bòrd na Gàidhlig's National Plan for Gaelic, but it is perhaps worth noting the significance it attaches in public pronouncements not just to increasing the numbers of Gaelic speakers, but also to the important role of those who already speak the language fluently in helping to achieve this goal:

> ... our aim is to make the learning of Gaelic attractive and accessible. Bòrd na Gàidhlig wants Gaelic speakers to help with this task. Gaelic speakers who have spoken the language all their lives have a great deal to contribute to the richness and quality of the language as it develops and is spoken by all.

(Arthur Cormack, Cathraiche (Chair), in the Foreword to "Ginealach Ùr na Gàidhlig" – an Action Plan to increase the numbers of Gaelic speakers – published by Bòrd na Gàidhlig in April 2010.)

Given the unusually high proportion of fluent speakers of Gaelic in the Uist population, and given the importance assigned to this group in national planning for the language, it may be seen that the way the Uist communities feel and think about Gaelic learning and use may have both a local and national significance.

1.2 Local Background

This section outlines the local community context in which various Gaelic development and teaching activities have occurred over the past fifteen years during which I have been an observer and participant. The focus is on adult learning and use rather than school-age activity, insofar as the two can be separated.

Fifteen years ago there was no college-based educational provision. The community education department of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES), the local council, offered evening classes for adult learners during the winter months, and there was also some voluntary sector activity, for example through Cothrom, the then newly established community training group in South Uist. In common with provision of this kind elsewhere (MacCaluim, 2006) its rather sporadic nature meant it was not really possible for participants to chart, let alone follow, a path to fluency via this route. At the same time, efforts would also be made to run classes in Gaelic literacy for fluent speakers from time to time, but these rarely got off the ground, due to difficulties in finding tutors and the low level of take-up from community members.

Other organised activity with a Gaelic focus delivered outside schools tended nonetheless to focus on school-age participants. Fèisean (summer schools) in North and South Uist were already well-established, with the South Uist fèis being notable for its insistence on Gaelic-medium instruction. Weekly Gaelic "Sradagan" youth group activity was also run, dependent on the support of Gaelic-speaking organisers in the community. Pre-school "cròileagan" provision was and remains also heavily dependent on the support of voluntary sector groups within the community.

Lews Castle College (LCC) opened its Benbecula campus in 1999, and the following year started its full-time Further Education course in Gaelic Language and Music. This was the first time that it became possible to study Gaelic as part of a full-time course of study in Uist outside of school-based education. Provision was differentiated to accommodate the needs of both beginners and more advanced learners or fluent speakers. This was to prove an attractive offer to incoming students from its inception, as well as drawing in some local residents.

The yearlong course was modelled to an extent on the success of the Ceòlas music summer school, which was started in South Uist in 1996. This is a high profile community-run weeklong event featuring music and dance tutors of the highest calibre from Scotland and Cape Breton, but which also integrates Gaelic language provision into its daily timetable of classes. From the start the school attracted a large proportion of incoming mainland and international students alongside local participants, attracted to no small degree by the perceived strength of Gaelic in the local community. Again a graded range of Gaelic language activities is offered to accommodate varying competence levels among the participants.

Some years later Skye-based SMO developed its online "Access Course" – An Cùrsa Inntrigidh – a highly structured correspondence course with substantial audio support materials and built-in weekly telephone tutorials plus the option of additional residential weekends. By 2004 there was a cohort of half a dozen Uist-based students on this course, many of them CnES employees. The course aimed to take participants through a series of graded tests over the course of two years to a level where they could be considered fluent enough to embark on a full-time course of Higher Education through the medium of Gaelic. Remote delivery of SMO courses in Gaelic has since been extended up to and beyond degree level. I am not aware of any Uist-based students following it through to this level.

More recently still, other teaching models have come to the fore for adult learners. "Gàidhlig san dachaidh", championed by TAIC (formerly CNSA, the Gaelic playgroups association), has been offered with a similar level of take-up (i.e. in single figures), as well as "Ùlpan" courses delivered via the Benbecula campus of LCC. This latter course and method have received the national endorsement of Bòrd na Gàidhlig (2010), and been resourced accordingly. Again the numbers in Uist rarely exceed half a dozen students at any one time.

So it must be acknowledged that elements of cohesion and progression have been introduced to the adult Gaelic teaching scene in Uist – through LCC, SMO, and Ùlpan – that were not in evidence 15 years ago. Nevertheless absolute numbers attending these courses remain small. Nor do they address the needs of fluent speakers, who show little inclination to enrol on literacy courses such as SMO's "Cuir peann ri pàipear", which was recently offered on a taster basis at Cothrom but failed to attract participants.

What the above summary fails to address, however, is the degree of self-help activity undertaken by individuals on a self-directed basis. In a situation characterised by patchy institutional provision in the shape of taught courses, it is my impression that self-reliant learners who are able to make progress through their own marshalling of individual and community contacts and resources are often the most successful. In this context, SMO and Cothrom have been working together over the past five years on the bilingual Island Voices/Guthan nan Eilean community-based materials development project. One of the fundamental aims of the project is to collect and make available video samples of authentic speech for the benefit of language learners to use as they see fit. These clips are contextualised with documentary-style introductions in plain language, and accompanied by transcripts and translations. They are also catalogued and classified according to topic, functional content, and notional language level using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). All of these materials are freely available online.

Series One of the project was created entirely within the Uists, while additional funding for Series Two enabled some filming to be undertaken on other islands, including Skye, Barra, Harris, Lewis, and St Kilda. The project was heavily dependent on the freely given co-operation of individual community members. By the end of Series Two (completed in December 2010) a total of 50 individuals had contributed interview material in the context of 24 separate documentary topics covering local events, activities and workplaces in relation to both cultural and vocational interests, producing a core archive of 150 items in Gaelic and English. At the beginning of August 2011 the view count on the YouTube channel stood at roughly 10,500 for the Gaelic materials, almost exactly half of the total. The project focus is now moving to still closer community engagement through the encouragement and development of User Generated Content. It is out of this partnership between SMO, Cothrom (and other community groups), and individual community members themselves, that the present research project was developed.

2. Research Project – Questions, Researcher and Contributors, Method

2.1 Research Questions

This is an exploratory study, aiming to throw some light on how this local community, with its strong Gaelic affinity, feels, and is able to express those feelings, in relation to how Gaelic is and can be learned and used. In order to impose a degree of coherence on this brief it was decided to approach it through three key Research Questions.

1. How do local Gaelic speakers and would-be speakers conceptualise and value Gaelic-English bilingualism?

2. How do local Gaelic speakers and would-be speakers value the ability to read and write it?

3. What factors may influence preferred choice of language in learner and fluent speaker interaction?

These questions were developed through a process of reflection over key issues which appear to have particular significance in relation to how the Gaelic skills embedded in the community might be maintained, and indeed exploited, in order to support local language development opportunities and perhaps also the wider national agenda as articulated by Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

The concept of bilingualism, for example, is frequently invoked as a selling point for encouraging people to learn Gaelic, though a detailed examination or explanation of what the term might mean is offered less often. In Uist, where many people share both English and Gaelic, and frequently code-mix between the two, this project aimed to explore the extent to which bilinguals develop a positive "holistic" sense of their extended language skills, or tend to a view of parallel but compartmentalized "monolingual competences" each with differing degrees of completeness or accomplishment. This could have important implications for how comfortable or confident speakers might feel about using their Gaelic.

Secondly, in relation to literacy, fluent Gaelic speakers here who have had the language all their lives may not habitually read or write it. However, their command of the spoken language is self-evidently superior (except perhaps to themselves) to that of almost any adult learner. Literacy is a "high prestige" item in any lay listing of language skills. Its absence may be perceived as critical in any self-evaluation of competence, and therefore undermine confidence in interaction with other speakers and would-be speakers. This project aimed to find out how Gaelic speakers (particularly habitually non-literate ones) view Gaelic writing, and whether literacy might be viewed as a pre-requisite in any positive self-evaluation of competence.

Thirdly, Gaelic learners who come to the islands may sometimes express disappointment in the amount of Gaelic they hear around them in the community, and in a perceived reluctance on the part of local Gaelic speakers to engage with them in the language. The problem, or "blame" in a sometimes judgmental debate, may often be laid at the fluent speakers' door, without necessarily much attempt at understanding it from their perspective. The present project aims to bring out some of the issues from the fluent speaker's side, for example relating to language choice for a bilingual, and the recognizing and

valuing of competences. A deeper appreciation of what may be complex interactional dynamics might be key to developing effective strategies to deal with the perceived problem.

2.2 Researcher's Profile

I am myself a member of the community that is the focus of this study. Therefore, although I have a background in language teaching and applied linguistics, I do not claim a "detached" research perspective. On the contrary, the research questions addressed in this study go to the heart of issues with which I have been actively professionally and personally engaged since coming to live and work in this community fifteen years ago.

Greenbank (2003) makes the following point about the importance of researchers establishing their positionality:

> Users of both quantitative and qualitative methods all need to recognise the influence of values on the research process. … The inclusion of reflexive accounts and the acknowledgement that educational research cannot be value-free should be included in all forms of research … researchers who do not include a reflexive account should be criticised. (798)

To the extent that my community profile or perceived partisanship may impinge on the way that other contributors to the study express themselves in their interactions with me, or on how I interpret their contributions, it is therefore appropriate to sketch my own background in moderate detail, at least since my arrival in Uist.

I came to live in Uist in March 1996, having been appointed to the post of Development Officer for Further Education (FE). (This was by no means my first encounter with the islands, as my mother was from North Uist, so I had had regular summer holidays here since childhood.) In this role my responsibility was to bring forward proposals both for appropriate FE curricular development and for physical accommodation for any new courses offered. This work resulted, among other things, in the construction of the LCC Benbecula Campus and the development of the FE Course in Gaelic Language and Music (alongside other courses).

Although not brought up as a Gaelic speaker, my linguistic interest and family background had already prompted me to start learning the language as an adult some years before arriving in Uist. I have no doubt, however, that my competence and confidence in the language increased greatly after moving here to live. My work entailed some degree of public relations work, including occasional radio or television interviews, usually in Gaelic. That an "incoming" professional should be able when called upon to address the community in Gaelic would be sufficiently exceptional to attract additional interest, and may well have resulted in my being recognized as having pro-Gaelic sympathies, a position with which I felt and feel quite comfortable.

In 2004 I took up employment with SMO while remaining a Uist resident. For a while I was a phone tutor on An Cùrsa Inntrigidh while also developing the Island Voices project work. In time the project work became a full-time commitment. I still work from home here in Benbecula. The bulk of the Island Voices location filming work has been Uist-based, and editing and uploading to online platforms are, of course, functions that can be performed anywhere with a good broadband connection.

The past fifteen years have seen a marked revolution in communications technology, which has made itself felt here as elsewhere, so an outline of my "community profile" would be incomplete without a mention of online activity. I have a personal website on which my curriculum vitae is placed in the public domain, together with a project blog and video portal (Island Voices) and a personal blog (on which I occasionally write on Gaelic and general language issues), and I participate in various social media such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition to enabling the formation of my own "Personal Learning Network", these services are valuable for keeping in touch with other local community members scattered across the islands who have taken to them with enthusiasm. They also serve to bring my work and interests to the attention of a much wider circle of contacts who follow Gaelic and/or Hebridean matters, or have more general language teaching or linguistic interests.

2.3 Contributors' Profiles

As part of the study I interviewed 14 other Uist residents. Following public announcement of the commencement of the research project in both the local community newspaper, "Am Pàipear", and on the Island Voices website, the sampling was opportunistic rather than random, dependent to an extent on interest and availability at the time of the study. Though some effort was made to "balance" the group in terms of age and gender, and between learners and fluent speakers and "locals" and "incomers", no claim is made that this group constitutes a "representative" sample of the entire Uist population. What they all do have in common is a known interest in, and professed support for, the Gaelic language. A significant proportion had already made contributions to the Island Voices project through recording interviews or offering other additional support. All have a record of participation in one or more of the activities and networks outlined in the Local Background section above.

Summary statistical details of the group are given in Tables 2-5 below.

Table 2. Number of contributors by Age and Gender

Age	Female	Male	Total
Under 21	1	1	2
21-30	0	1	1
31-40	2	0	2
41-50	2	3	5
51-60	1	1	2
61-70	0	0	0
71 and over	1	1	2

Table 3. Length of Uist Residence

Years resident	Female	Male	Total
5 or less	2	3	5
6-10	0	0	0
11-15	0	0	0
16-20	1	0	1
Over 20	0	0	0
Lifelong	4	4	8

Table 4. Education

Highest Qualification	Female	Male	Total
"Ordinary"/Standard Grades	0	1	1
Highers/Adv Highers	1	3	4
Professional Qualification/HNC/D	3	2	5
Degree/Postgraduate	3	1	4

Table 5. Self-assessed Gaelic skills

Gaelic	No (unqualified)	A little	Middling	A lot	Yes (unqualified)
Speak	0	2	1	2	9
Listen and Understand	0	1	3	1	9
Write	0	3	2	2	7
Read and Understand	0	2	2	2	8

The following paragraphs provide short "pen portraits" of each individual contributor, using anonymised aliases.

Alan

Alan is over 71, and a lifelong resident of Uist. He left school at the age of 14 with an ordinary day school qualification to take up crofting and fishing. He speaks, understands, reads and writes Gaelic without hesitation. He is well known in the community as being a keen supporter of the Gaelic language.

Alasdair

Alasdair is in his fifties, and a lifelong resident of Uist. He left school after gaining Highers. He reads and writes Gaelic, but not with the same confidence as he speaks and understands it. Over the years he has been a strong supporter of the local Gaelic fèis (summer school).

Angus

Angus is in his forties, and a lifelong resident of Uist, though he has spent some years away as a student and working. He is qualified to postgraduate diploma level and is at ease in all four skills in Gaelic. He is well known as a teacher of Gaelic to adults throughout the Uists.

Ann

Ann has turned 40, and is a lifelong resident of Uist. She is qualified to MSc level, and is comfortable speaking and listening to Gaelic, though less confident in her reading and writing. She is involved in youth and community work.

Catherine

Catherine is in her forties. She is a lifelong resident of Uist and is qualified to HNC level. She is confident in all four skills in Gaelic, which she uses on a daily basis in her office-based work.

Donald

Donald is in his forties. He was raised on Uist, spent over a decade away working on the mainland, but returned to the islands and works in the media. He has an HNC and is now studying for a degree in his own time. He is comfortable speaking and listening to Gaelic, but reads and writes with less confidence.

Fiona

Fiona is under 21, and a lifelong resident of Uist who went through Gaelic-medium education at primary school. She is qualified to Advanced Higher level and is confident in all four skills in Gaelic. She works in a local shop and has also been active in supporting local Gaelic youth groups.

Flora

Flora is in her seventies. She has been resident in Uist for less than five years, but has been a regular visitor since the age of 8, having family connections here. She has an MA and an accomplished background in language teaching. She is learning Gaelic. She has a middling competence in reading and listening but is less confident in her speaking and writing skills.

Jean

Jean is in her thirties and has been resident in Uist less than five years, having been raised overseas. She is qualified to postgraduate level, and has successfully learned Gaelic as an adult to the point where she is confident in all four skills.

John

John is under 21, resident in Uist less than five years as he came here as a student after completing his Highers, with a specific goal of improving his Gaelic. He went through Gaelic-medium education on the mainland and counts himself confident in speaking, listening, and reading, though less so in writing.

Margaret

Margaret is in her early fifties and has been living in Uist for twenty years. She is a keen supporter of Gaelic in her family and in the community through voluntary group activity, for example in support of a local cròileagan (Gaelic nursery). She has also attended classes, but doesn't claim a high level of skill in the language herself, being more confident in speaking and listening than in reading and writing. She is professionally qualified.

Marion

Marion is in her forties and is a lifelong resident of Uist. She works in the health field and is professionally qualified, and she is confident in all four skills in Gaelic. She has supported the local Gaelic fèis, and is involved in church and other voluntary group activities.

Norman

Norman is in his twenties, resident in Uist less than five years as he came here as a student to follow a music course. He received Gaelic-medium education on the mainland, and left school after completing Highers. He is fairly confident in his speaking, reading, and writing skills in Gaelic, but finds listening more difficult.

Paul

Paul is in his forties, and arrived in Uist about a year ago. He is keen to learn Gaelic and is attending local classes, but so far considers himself to be still at the beginning stage. He has a professional qualification from another European country, and is currently working in a local shop.

2.4 Method

The interview structure was flexibly based on a proforma questionnaire and the Research Question list. The primary function of the questionnaire was to collect the basic statistical information collated in the tables above. As part of the UHI ethical procedures process, contributors were also given an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, and offered a choice of English, Gaelic, or a combination of both languages in which to conduct the interview. All participants readily agreed to the interview being recorded. As interviewer, I explained that there were three main questions that I wished to address during the course of the interview, but that I was keen that the conversation should be free enough to allow interviewees to express themselves in their own terms on both these issues and any others which they felt had a bearing on the research topic. As an ice-breaker, and before addressing any of the

research questions, I therefore made a point of inviting interviewees to first say a little about themselves in general and about their use of, or involvement with, Gaelic in their daily life.

Interviews varied in length between 20 and 45 minutes, and finished with me verbally summarizing the main points I had taken from the conversation. I then listened again to the recording at the earliest opportunity, and took close notes of what the interviewee said, paying particular attention to issues relating to the three Research Questions but also noting any other points the interviewee highlighted as important. I did not create a full verbatim transcript of each recorded interview, but did transcribe substantial parts of some interviews where I thought use of the interviewee's own words may prove valuable in subsequent reporting and analysis.

I produced a concise written summary of each interviewee's main points which I then fed back to them electronically for confirmation of accuracy. In this second stage I also invited participants to reflect on the points we had discussed and to get back to me if they wished to clarify anything they had said or to add any further thoughts. Three of the fourteen contributors used this opportunity to add to what they had said during the interviews.

As already noted, my own role as researcher in this study is inseparable from my role as community member. This is not a "detached" study in which the interviewees are treated as objects or subjects of research. Rather, they and I are all community participants in a disciplined co-operative study, with myself occupying a specialized reporting and analytic role. This means that my interaction with other contributors is not based on, or restricted to, one free-standing interview per interviewee. It is situated within a more dynamic process of collaboration. The purpose of the study is not to present a statistical report based on broad-based survey work. Rather, through a process of dialogue within the community it is hoped to provide more of an in-depth picture at this point in time of some of the key underlying dynamics in a constantly evolving social and linguistic process. It also follows that a version of this report needs to be made readily available for all contributors to it, and to any other interested community members, hopefully informing new phases in local Gaelic development, and perhaps on a wider stage too.

3. Findings

3.1 Research Question 1: How do local Gaelic speakers and would-be speakers conceptualise and value Gaelic-English bilingualism?

3.1.1 Context
There are no remaining adult monolingual speakers of Gaelic in Uist. Virtually all Gaelic speakers here and elsewhere in Scotland are also fluent in English. As already noted, Gaelic development bodies seek to attract new speakers of the language through reference to the benefits of bilingualism, among other things. Indeed, research on the potential health benefits of having two languages (eg Craik, Bialystok, &

Freedman 2010) has received recent widespread media coverage both in print and online, often picked up and amplified in social media particularly by individuals and groups with a Gaelic interest.

Bilingualism is also a subject of serious theoretical debate in various interlocking academic fields such as applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, with a range of definitions on offer. The notion of "balanced bilingualism", as Grosjean (2010) notes, in which the speaker is held to have a completely equal mastery of all skills in both languages is generally acknowledged to be rarely evidenced in real life. On the other hand, an ability to use two (or more) languages to different degrees in different spheres of life is held to be the norm in many communities around the world. In this light the monolingual English life of large sections of British and Scottish society may be seen as the exception rather than the rule.

In the case of Gaelic and other endangered languages, however, the benefits of all forms of bilingualism do not go uncontested. Fishman (eg 2001) is a major authority on strategies for Reversing Language Shift, within which field the dangers of so-called "unidirectional bilingualism" are highlighted. In a contact situation between a low prestige minority language and a high prestige majority language in which all speakers of the former learn and use the latter, but the converse does not occur, the survival of the first language is considered threatened, as the dominant language proceeds to take over more and more of the domains of daily use, eventually extinguishing the endangered language completely.

On a more positive note, and in a psycholinguistic and language learning context, Cook (2002), among others, has posited the notion of "multicompetence" to cover the full range of linguistic skills that a speaker of more than one language (no matter to what level) has. In this framework L1 and L2 (Language One and Language Two) are not two completely independent systems operating (and perhaps competing) within the same speaker's head, but each to some extent and in some ways interacts with and influences the other. In a similar vein Coste, Moore and Zarate (2009) for the Council of Europe propose a positive conceptualisation of "plurilingual and pluricultural competence" in which bilingual speech (or code-mixing) is a natural communicative phenomenon, and the key constructive issue, whether in or out of schools, is the "strategic management of imbalance" (20).

It is a daily observed occurrence in this community, where so many people speak two languages, to hear conversations in which speakers frequently change between Gaelic and English, very often within the borders of a single sentence, suggesting that the "language boundaries" in a bilingual's competence are naturally porous at the very least, and that the two languages do indeed interact in a meaningful way.

In the Uist context, it can be surmised that the way people think about their various language skills may affect their confidence and willingness to deploy them. If, for example, a speaker of both Gaelic and English should tend to the view that an equal competence in all productive and receptive skills in both languages is the only true mark of bilingualism, then any comparative shortage of skill in one language, for example in reading and writing Gaelic, may lead to a negative evaluation of competence in that language. This may lead to knock-on effects in terms of willingness to use it.

On the other hand, an asymmetric but "multicompetent" or "plurilingual" model of language skills might offer a positive perspective. If the same speaker were to take an overall view of their language skills "in the round" and note that they were in possession of an additional set, for example the ability to speak and understand Gaelic, by comparison with a monolingual English speaker, then this could arguably provide a basis of confidence from which to derive comfort, particularly when interacting with learners. In a model of bilingualism in which L1 and L2 interact, however, questions of definition and acceptability may also arise.

In this context it was felt appropriate to explore what community members themselves thought about bilingualism and what value they attached to it, or whether indeed these topics were the subject of any introspection at all. This question was productive of a lot of debate and discussion, particularly in relation to code-mixing. The following summary deals first with concepts of bilingualism, and then with how it is valued. A supplementary section covers the specific topic of code-mixing.

3.1.2 Concepts of Bilingualism

When asked to define what bilingualism meant to them there was a fair degree of unanimity within the group on a "common sense" explanation, expressed with simple clarity for example by Alan:

> Gun tèid agam air bruidhinn sa Ghàidhlig agus sa Bheurla gu fileanta.

> (That I can speak Gaelic and English fluently)

However, Fiona and Marion (also both fluent Gaelic speakers) felt that the term should also imply the ability to read and write in both languages. Paul, who was brought up speaking another European language and only started learning English in school, was reluctant to call himself bilingual in those two languages as, for him, the term implied that you were raised from birth with both languages. On reflection, and after doing some further reading online on the subject, he recognised and accepted a distinction between "simultaneous" and "sequential" bilingualism and placed himself in the latter category.

In further discussion in relation to actual use everyone agreed that it was likely that the different languages were likely to be used to different degrees in different situations. A notion of "equal fluency" therefore needed some qualification, as Gaelic or English might feel more "natural" at any given time, depending not just on who you were speaking to, but also the situation or subject of conversation. Marion, for example, reported that she would not be so comfortable handling some church-related activities in English. Ann also reported naturally praying in Gaelic, as well as using it to babies and her dog. Alasdair, another fluent Gaelic speaker, felt that he would nonetheless be more comfortable using English to discuss some technical matters, giving computing as one example.

3.1.3 Value of Bilingualism

When asked what value they placed on bilingualism contributors generally divided fairly evenly between those who clearly viewed it positively and those who reported having generally given it no heed. All

those who aspired to learn more Gaelic were in the former camp alongside some fluent speakers, with the latter group comprising the rest of the fluent speakers.

Flora spoke from her years of experience of teaching in multilingual inner city contexts in England of the recognised "cognitive importance and benefits of bilingualism, and the need for more coherent recognition of this within education", while John, who had had experience of Gaelic-medium education on a mainland primary school, expressed enthusiasm for the level of bilingualism he had so far achieved:

> I feel great about having it, yeah.

In the same vein, Norman reported that his similar early experience of Gaelic-medium education, despite having English as his main language, had helped him learn French as a third language in secondary school.

By contrast, several Uist-raised fluent speakers reported that they or their peers had not given the subject much, if any, consideration.

In the words of Angus,

> Tha mi a' smaointinn nach eil sinn, 's dòcha, a' cur suim a dh'fhaodamaid a chur ann.

> (I think we don't, perhaps, put the value on it that we might.)

Catherine linked the same point powerfully to the perceived historical stigma attached to Gaelic and its speakers:

> The ordinary Joe – nan tòisicheadh tu bruidhinn riutha mu dheidhinn bilingualism cha chreid mi gum biodh a' chuid mhòr aca ag ràdh hey hang on a minute, tha mise bilingual.

> (The ordinary Joe – if you started speaking to them about bilingualism I don't think most would say hey hang on a minute, I'm bilingual.)

> Tha an eachdraidh an aghaidh na Gàidhlig agus an eachdraidh, tha mi cinnteach, a bha a' cumail na daoine sìos, tha buaidh aig an sineach air na daoine fhathast... Chan eil iad a' faicinn an luach air na rudan a th' aca gu nàdarra, na sgilean a th' aca gu nàdarra, an cànan a th' aca gu nàdarra – rudan eile that come with the package gun do rugadh is gun do thogadh tu ann an Uibhist.

> (The history against Gaelic, and the history, I'm sure, that kept the people down, still have an impact on the people... They don't see the value of the things that they have naturally, the skills that they have naturally, the language that they have naturally – other things that come with the package if you were born and raised in Uist.)

In an additional comment, Catherine also remarked on the special esteem that had been accorded in the community to the last Gaelic monoglot in the locality. However, despite his high reputation she doubted whether anyone now would want to be in his position:

Chan eil e gu diofar cà' bheil thu san t-saoghal, feumaidh tu a' Bheurla... Tha a' Bheurla cho làidir air feadh an t-saoghail.

(It doesn't matter where you are in the world, you need English... English is so strong all over the world.)

3.1.4 Code-mixing

In several interviews discussion of bilingualism led naturally to a consideration of the way Gaelic-English bilinguals frequently mix their two languages in everyday speech. Various terms are used to describe this phenomenon, including "code-switching", "code-mixing", "translanguaging", and others – each with its own specific connotations. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the intricacies of this debate, and I use "code-mixing" here as a catch-all term for the act of using elements of two languages in a single conversational interaction.

Recent studies in other parts of Britain have looked at this behaviour in an educational context. Creese and Blackledge (2010) conducted research in Chinese and Gujarati community language schools, and used their findings to argue for a release from monolingual instructional approaches. Musk (2010) used his observations of interaction amongst Welsh bilingual teenagers to expose "a gap between informal language practices and the ideological insistence on maintaining strict language boundaries, for example, in educational contexts" (179). While these are interesting issues which may well need further examination in relation to the Gaelic context, the main point here is that this code-mixing behaviour is a widespread, perhaps universal, phenomenon in bilingual environments. Its occurrence in Gaelic-English bilingual communities might thus be viewed as a "natural" phenomenon rather than being something "artificial", or peculiar to Gaelic alone, or indeed the occasion for any surprise.

To the extent that it challenges preconceived notions of language correctness or purity it may nonetheless attract disapproval. This is an important consideration in the context of this study as perceived disapprobation may in turn impact on the level of comfort fluent speakers feel in their conscious use of Gaelic, for example when attempting to converse with learners.

Angus pinpointed this affective issue in his own discussion of code-switching:

Tha sinn uile dualach a bhith a' cur Beurla am measg an rud a chanas sinn. 'S e dìreach fasan a th' ann. Ach uaireannan bidh daoine a' magadh ort airson sin a dhèanamh cuideachd. Chan eil duine sam bith ag iarraidh magadh bho dhuine sam bith.

(We are all likely to put English in things we say. It's just a habit. But sometimes people mock you for doing that. Nobody wants to be mocked by anyone.)

Alan stated that he preferred to keep the two languages separate in his speech:

Nam bheachd-sa co-dhiù ma tha corra fhacal ann tha e math gu leòr, ach ma tha tuilleadh 's a chòrr ann de Bheurla a' tighinn a-staigh air a' Ghàidhlig chan eil sin a' coimhead ro mhath... Tha mise a' feuchainn ri bruidhinn coileanta gu leòr mas urrainn dhomh – ma tha mi sa Ghàidhlig.

(In my own view anyway if there are a few words that's alright, but if there's too much English coming in on the Gaelic that doesn't look too good... I try to speak well enough if I can – if I'm in Gaelic.)

At the same time he voiced doubts about the value of inventing new Gaelic vocabulary for items that were habitually referred to by their English names:

Tha draining board ann an shin. Carson a tha thu a' dol a dh'fheuchainn facal eile airson sin? 'S cha bhi fios aig an duine nach cuala riamh am facal sin cò air a tha thu a' bruidhinn.

(There's a draining board there. Why are you going to try another word for that? And the person that's never heard that word won't know what you're talking about.)

While this opinion relates to the use of isolated loanwords, Catherine, although a skilled code-mixer herself as previous quotes show, also expressed concern as to where a line should be drawn. Citing the example of "traffic na ferry" (for "ferry traffic") she posed this question:

Mura bheil thu a' cleachdadh ach na faclan beaga a bheil thu air a' Ghàidhlig a chall?

(If you only use the small words have you lost the Gaelic?)

She also questioned whether speakers were even aware of their mixing of the two languages:

Ach nad inntinn tha mise a' creidsinn gu bheil thu a' creidsinn gu bheil thu a' bruidhinn Gàidhlig.

(But in your imagination I think that you believe that you are speaking Gaelic.)

This questioning of the awareness of where the language boundaries lie was raised by others too. Donald, another fluent Gaelic speaker, described his own thoughts on code-mixing in some detail:

If I'm talking to someone like X (a bilingual acquaintance) we switch languages continuously, and you're not doing that always because you can't find the word in Gaelic. You're just doing it because it's just naturally part of who and what you are. You've been brought up speaking two languages, you know, from birth. You're comfortable in both languages, and you just switch between the two... It's almost as if – you know I'm fluent in Gaelic and I'm fluent in English. It's almost as if the two things become one language.

A similar observation is offered from an external perspective by Jean, who learnt Gaelic to fluency as an adult:

Tha e inntinneach dhomh a bhith a' faicinn dhaoine aig a bheil Gàidhlig bho thùs, agus uaireannan tha iad a' dol eadar an dà chànan – tha e cho nàdarra a bhith a' dol bho Ghàidhlig gu Beurla, Beurla gu Gàidhlig gun a bhith a' smuaintinn sìon mu dheidhinn. Dhomhsa 's e comharra gur e fìor bilingual a th' ann an cuidegin mar sin – chan eil fiù's 's dòcha fhios aca cò an cànan a tha iad a' bruidhinn.

(It's interesting to me to see people who've always had Gaelic, and sometimes they go between the two languages – it's so natural to go from Gaelic to English, English to Gaelic without thinking anything about it. For me it's a mark that someone like that is a true bilingual – they maybe don't even know which language they're speaking.)

3.1.5 Summary

What bilingualism is, and what value it might have, are not necessarily topics to which Gaelic-English bilinguals may have given much thought. When invited to reflect upon it, however, contributors to this study readily grasped that a concept of "balanced bilingualism" rarely has practical application in the real world. Furthermore, there is a recognition that bilinguals do not necessarily maintain strict boundaries between their languages in practice. Although code-mixing is a common phenomenon, there is also a recognition that those who practise it may make themselves vulnerable to criticism or occasional derision.

Overall, while learners of Gaelic professed to positively value bilingualism, local fluent speakers may not. There may also be a conflict between an "idealised" vision of what bilingualism should comprise and the reality of how it works in practice.

3.2 Research Question 2: How do local Gaelic speakers and would-be speakers value the ability to read and write it?

3.2.1 Context

As already noted, many Gaelic speakers do not habitually read or write it. (At the national level the 2001 census found that 46.7% of self-reporting Gaelic speakers had only partial or no Gaelic literacy skills.) In this context McEwan-Fujita (2010a) casts a close analytical eye over potential pitfalls in interaction between fluent speakers of Gaelic and adult learners, theorising that an "ideological filter of literate speakerhood" may inhibit or impede successful communication in Gaelic. To summarise in very broad terms (and at the risk of some oversimplification), a sense of inadequacy in full Gaelic competence may be engendered if a speaker's set of skills does not include "schooled" literacy in the language. This may lead to a lack of confidence on the part of both fluent speaker and learner (who may be encountering for the first time a language speaker without literacy) in any attempted Gaelic interaction between them. Unsurprisingly, this lack of mutual comfort will frequently result in recourse to the shared competence both speakers have in English, if not the end of the conversation completely.

McEwan-Fujita, (who did a significant portion of the fieldwork for her original PhD in Uist around 1999-2000), concludes her argument with a powerful list of reasons to question the assumed pre-requisite value attached to schooled literacy. This includes reference to current revitalisation planning and efforts. Discussing a split between literate Gaelic learners and non-literate L1 speakers, she avers,

> ... it is problematic to the extent that the revitalization of Gaelic in Scotland is staked on creating a self-sustaining community of fully-literate balanced Gaelic-English bilinguals when nearly half

of Gaelic-English bilinguals are partially-literate or non-literate in Gaelic. In these contexts, the spectrum of definitions and practices of Gaelic literacies must not be taken for granted, but must be studied ethnographically and taken into account in the planning of Gaelic language revitalization efforts. (106).

In my discussions with research participants, I was keen to find out not only if fluent speakers considered themselves able to read and write Gaelic, but also if they would regularly use those skills. I also wished to probe to what extent a disinclination to read or write Gaelic might affect speakers' willingness to use the language in conversation, particularly with learners.

3.2.2 Value of Literacy

While none of the respondents went so far as to say that literacy in Gaelic was not important, it was notable that those who valued it most highly tended to be learners and those members of the younger generation who had received Gaelic-medium education relatively recently. Fiona had no doubt that it was important:

> Tha mi-fhìn a' smaoineachadh gu bheil e cudromach airson an cànan a thuigsinn.
>
> (I myself think that it's important in order to understand the language.)

This is an interesting comment from a fluent speaker raised in a Gaelic-speaking home who would have been hearing and speaking Gaelic in that environment long before she started learning to read and write it in school. It perhaps indicates that, with the advent of Gaelic-medium education, a dominant "ideology" emphasising the importance of schooled literacy has been reinforced. Or it may simply be symptomatic of a widely perceived general weakening of Gaelic skills in the younger generation, to the extent that the written word is genuinely needed in some cases as a prop for understanding.

Paul, as a new learner of Gaelic, had an unequivocal stance:

> It would not be enough for me just to be able to speak and listen. Definitely not, because I want to be able to take my thoughts down, to write in Gaelic, to read Gaelic. Absolutely important. Absolutely important. Otherwise it would be incomplete.

Other older learners, while still of the view that literacy could be a helpful tool as well as a gateway to literature, showed a consciousness also of the fact that many fluent speakers do not read. Margaret could see that a lack of literacy might affect a speaker's confidence in using Gaelic with learners, and made a link from that to learners' use of book-learned vocabulary which may seem arcane to fluent speakers. Jean, also a learner, while keen to emphasise how literacy had opened up a wealth of literature to her, acknowledged that fluent speakers who hadn't had the same educational opportunities might have less confidence in their Gaelic skills than was truly warranted.

'S e tàmailt a th' ann gu bheil daoine ann, agus tha iad cho fileanta 's a ghabhas ann an Gàidhlig ach chan eil misneachd aca air sàilleabh 's nach eil na sgilean sgrìobhaidh no sgilean leughaidh aca.

(It's a shame that there are people, and they are as fluent as possible in Gaelic but they don't have confidence because they don't have writing skills or reading skills.)

She was strongly of the view that a Gaelic learner's ability to read and write in the language should not be taken as evidence of a higher level of competence in the language than that of a fluent speaker who lacked those skills, though she feared that some people would indeed view the matter that way.

Among the older L1 speakers, while all acknowledged an ability to read and write Gaelic – if not always with a high level of comfort – most also noted that they would use those skills rarely. Alan readily admitted that his English reading was much better:

Nam biodh leabhar Gàidhlig ann is leabhar Beurla, ged a tha taobh mòr agam leis a' Ghàidhlig 's e an leabhar Beurla a bhithinn airson a leughadh, thoradh gheibhinn troimhe gu math sgiobalta.

(If there was a Gaelic book and an English book, though I greatly favour Gaelic, it's the English book that I would want to read, because I would get through it really smartly.)

Ann and Marion both found a use for reading and writing Gaelic when helping children with homework, but little beyond that. Marion could think of no other regular use for her literacy skills:

Cha thogainn leabhar Gàidhlig uair sam bith. An aon àm a bhios mi gan useicheadh (na sgilean) 's e airson cuideachadh a' chlann.

(I would never lift a Gaelic book. The only time I use them (the skills) it's for helping the children.)

Angus and Donald, involved in the media and in teaching, did value the ability to read and write Gaelic at a personal level, and put those skills to use in their work. Yet they also expressed reservations about their usefulness or prevalence in the wider community.

In Angus's words,

A thaobh muinntir an àite fhèin, daoine beagan nas sine, tha mi a' creidsinn nach eil, nach eil mòran adhbhar aca, 's dòcha, a bhith a' sgrìobhadh sa Ghàidhlig. Bha daoine riamh – tha fasan aig daoine a bhith a' bruidhinn Gàidhlig ach a bhith a' sgrìobhadh sa Bheurla.

(For local people, people a little older, I believe they don't have much reason, maybe, to write in Gaelic. People were always – it's a custom for people to speak Gaelic but write in English.)

Donald linked the widespread lack of Gaelic literacy to traditional oral culture, asserting that Gaelic has always been an "oral language" and remembering stories and fables that his grandmother used to relate:

> That stuff was passed on orally. It wasn't ever, it wasn't written... So the notion that reading and writing is now an important part of Gaelic, I think, is kind of a false assumption really, because it wasn't previously.

> My parents are absolutely fluent Gaelic speakers, far more fluent than I will ever be, but I think if you put a Gaelic book in front of them they'd struggle to read it. And they certainly wouldn't ever write anything down in Gaelic at all. They'd have no reason to either. So I don't know how much Gaelic literacy isn't an intellectual pursuit rather than anything to do with the culture in general, you know. But I like the term non-literacy rather than illiteracy. That gets to the heart of it.

Catherine is another contributor who now needs to read and write Gaelic in her work, and has seen her own Gaelic change or "progress" as a result. In terms of how this is valued in the community she had some doubts:

> Bidh mi an uair sin a' smaoineachadh gu bheil daoine – an àite a bhith a' còmhradh gu nàdarra – gu bheil iad a' faireachdainn gu bheil thu aig ìre eile leis a' Ghàidhlig agad. An uair sin, you know, is there a kind of intimidation into – ag atharrachadh gu bruidhinn Beurla?

> (Then I think that people – instead of conversing naturally – that they feel that you're at another level with your Gaelic. Then, you know, is there a kind of intimidation into – changing to speak English?)

It's a disturbing notion to think that one consequence of a fluent speaker's development of their Gaelic literacy skills may actually be the discouraging of Gaelic use by their interlocutors. But it may be viewed as corroboration from a situation of fluent speaker interaction of the kind of phenomenon already discussed that can problematise the relationship between literate learners and non-literate L1 speakers.

On a more positive note, Ann was keen to relate how young people are taking their literacy skills into new online arenas. Although she struggles to get her children to speak Gaelic she has noted that their literacy skills in Gaelic are much better than hers. She related how her son was abroad and had taken to writing in Gaelic on Facebook:

> My nephew who's twelve and all his pals – they look up to Y (Ann's son) who's playing football in A (another country) – but because Y's their pal and he's facebooking in Gaelic they have taken a different interest in Gaelic and they've seen a real use for it.

3.2.3 Summary

Within the group as a whole there was a significant proportion of participants who valued being able to read and write Gaelic, whether to help them learn the language or for other personal or job-related reasons. On the other hand, while all the fluent Gaelic speakers professed to be able to read and write, even if not with the same ease with which they could speak, several freely admitted that they would rarely, if ever, do so by choice. There was also evidence of a generational gap, following the advent of Gaelic-medium education, which has meant that younger Gaelic speakers do feel more comfortable reading and writing it, even if their speaking skills do not match those of their parents or grandparents.

Several participants expressed the concern that a relative underconfidence in literacy skills could spill over into an apparent reluctance on the part of fluent speakers to converse in Gaelic, whether with Gaelic learners or indeed with other known fluent speakers who might exhibit signs of "book-learned" language.

3.3 Research Question 3: What factors may influence preferred choice of language in learner and fluent speaker interaction?

3.3.1 Context

As remarked in the introduction, in the national context of efforts to revitalise Gaelic, importance is publicly attached both to encouraging more adults to learn Gaelic, and to enlisting the support of fluent speakers in that process. Bòrd na Gàidhlig engaged a team of researchers based at Edinburgh University to report on adult Gaelic learning in Scotland, which reported in May 2010 (MacLeod, Pollok, MacCaluim, 2010). This was a wide-ranging survey of provision across the country. It concludes that there is a number of shortcomings in relation to provision of Gaelic for Adults, and provides a list of 17 recommendations for improvement, including as the 17th that "opportunities for learners to use Gaelic in a social context should be proactively developed." (63).

The report is based on substantial quantitative survey work, and notes the difficulty that learners may encounter in trying to speak to "native speakers" as among the obstacles some feel they need to overcome in order to succeed. What the report does not do, or claim to do, is analyse the interactional dynamics which may give rise to this "problem". Nor is it able to offer much insight into any successes achieved by learners who pursue a path to fluency independently of organised Gaelic for Adults provision, perhaps with the help of community networks that they have managed to build for themselves.

To the extent that the support of L1 speakers of Gaelic is truly needed and desired in the adult learning enterprise it can be argued that unless and until any inherent problems in learner-fluent speaker interaction are understood, and possible solutions to them disseminated, such a project risks continued failure. Based on her Uist fieldwork, McEwan-Fujita (2010b) offers an anthropological insight into key affective dynamics underlying this kind of interaction. She proposes that a "socialized combination of ideology and negative affect reduces opportunities for Gaelic speaking, hindering both Gaelic learners' efforts to become fluent speakers and their potential contribution to language revitalization" (27).

However, she also notes that, despite "infrastructural, cognitive, and social barriers", her learner interviewees living in Uist managed to make "significant progress in learning Gaelic" (58).

In posing the third research question in this study I hoped to throw some explanatory light on what may be crucial affective issues underlying language choice in a bilingual context, as viewed and articulated by community members. The scope of the question actually went beyond interactions just between a fluent speaker and a learner where each interlocutor already has a knowledge or conception of the other's competence in Gaelic. In the initial negotiation of the medium of communication between strangers it may be that neither knows whether the other is bilingual. Research participants' reports of how they handled this negotiation were also potentially significant, as this might well have a bearing on the following interaction even once each interlocutor's level of Gaelic skill had become known. Discussions relating to code-mixing, reported above, also have a close bearing on this subject.

I was also keen to get some indication of the research participants' own personal views on how problematic they had found learner-fluent speaker interaction to be, whether they were learners or fluent speakers. Any strategies they had developed for coping with the situation were also of interest.

3.3.2 Factors Influencing Language Choice

Within this group it should first be said that all those who considered themselves to be still learning Gaelic reported a degree of positive engagement with fluent Gaelic speakers that substantially outweighed some negative experiences. This may suggest that the group is not fully representative of Gaelic learners nationally, or perhaps that, through a combination of experience of living alongside large numbers of fluent speakers and personal commitment, they had all found or developed successful strategies for making the most of their opportunities.

The young students, John and Donald, both professed to be very happy with the opportunities they had found to speak Gaelic in the community, while recognizing that each interaction with a new interlocutor required some degree of tactful negotiation. John felt that it was important not to appear patronising, but at the same time said that the learner could take a subtle lead in switching the interaction from English to Gaelic:

> It's up to yourself. I mean most people, if they know you're not from here, they're going to speak to you in English, because they kind of assume. But if you kind of say, well I've got a wee bit of Gaelic, you kind of make it for yourself. It's down to what you make of it for yourself.

Another very positive example of learner encouragement and successful progress was provided by Paul. Although only a recent arrival in Uist he found himself in daily contact with lots of people through his employment in a local shop. He quickly decided he should try to learn Gaelic as a means of integrating into the local community, and was very pleased with the impact of his first efforts at speaking with shoppers (as was the shop owner, who was happy to note customers' positive reaction). It would be true to say that Paul has well developed social skills in any case, plus perhaps a special interest in language learning being an L1 speaker of another European language, but he quickly developed a strategy for assessing which customers to try his Gaelic out on. Although he adheres to the "universal

rule" of using English first with strangers, he makes a point of listening carefully for hints of Gaelic speech:

> If they say something like "Sin agad e" as the last item is scanned that's a signal that they are Gaelic-speaking.

He looks for these hints, which may provide a cue for exchanging a Gaelic pleasantry or two. This may then form a basis to develop further Gaelic exchanges the next time the customer is in the shop.

Some of the older learners were also keen to acknowledge a sense of imposition on, or indebtedness to, fluent speakers who spoke Gaelic to them. In Margaret's words,

> People have been really tolerant of me, possibly because those who know me as Z's wife have been really gracious... They know that it's going to run out at some point when we run into any kind of depth of conversation. But they go with me until I run out.

Jean, a very successful learner, articulated some of the difficulties that a learner's desire to speak Gaelic might impose on the fluent speaker:

> Chan eil e 's dòcha ceart a bhith a' smuaintinn gu bheil iad a' dol a bhith cho comhfhurtail a bhith a' bruidhinn ri cuideigin le blas diofraichte, nach eil cho fileanta, a tha a' feuchainn ri bruidhinn air cuspairean air nach eil na daoine seo a' bruidhinn mar as àbhaist.

> (It's maybe not right to assume that they're going to be comfortable speaking to someone with a different accent, who's not so fluent, who's trying to talk about subjects that these people don't usually talk about.)

In remarks which echoed Catherine's points already quoted about historical stigma, and which revealed a real depth of emotional investment in the language, Flora also noticed the potential for embarrassment:

> There's been so much oppression and indoctrination of people like my father. Gaelic was an oppressed language, its people weren't allowed to speak it in school... One of my neighbours is really quite embarrassed – she's embarrassed to say her Gaelic in front of me when I ask for her advice.

From the fluent speakers' side all participants expressed a willingness, and in some cases a strong desire, to help learners with their Gaelic in any way they could. I saw no reason to doubt the sincerity of these declarations, but was particularly interested to explore how these expressions of good will might be qualified in practice.

Several ascribed a degree of diffidence or hesitancy on their own part in using Gaelic with learners to a perceived weakness in their own Gaelic. This might well be because of a poverty of provision during their own school years. Alasdair remarked on how he had hated Gaelic when at school, and while his attitude to the language was now very positive he still bore the scars of the early negative experience:

Tha an sgrìobhadh agam truagh fhathast.

(My writing is still poor.)

Ann described how talking to learners made her self-conscious in her use of Gaelic. She contrasted how she would naturally use English words like "sausage" or "sandwich" when talking Gaelic to her mother with her more stilted behaviour with learners:

I would say "fad na weekend" unless I was talking to, say… If I was talking to someone who was learning Gaelic I would use "deireadh sheachdain". (Laughing.) Why? That's mad.

When quizzed at the end of the interview on why she had chosen to use English in it she related her decision to her insecurity with what she perceived to be "correct" Gaelic:

I suppose I was thinking you might not understand all my Gaelic, because you've learnt it, and you'll have all the correct words.

Jean's successful learner strategy for easing fluent speakers' insecurity with "bookish" or "correct" vocabulary was, perhaps paradoxically, actually to "unlearn" some of what she had been taught formally, and introduce commonly used English loanwords (such as "weekend", for example, in place of "deireadh sheachdain") into her speech:

Ma tha thu airson Gàidhlig nàdarra a chleachdadh chan e Gàidhlig nàdarra a th' ann a bhith a' cur na faclan ùra a tha seo gu feum.

(If you want to use natural Gaelic it's not natural Gaelic to be putting these new words to use.)

A simpler explanation of failure to engage in Gaelic with learners was offered by some participants. Marion made the point, as did several other contributors, that Gaelic was habitually used only with known acquaintances, and never on first meeting a stranger. The strength of this habit meant that a conversation opener in Gaelic by a stranger would be met almost automatically with a reply in English:

Tha mise cinnteach gur e dìreach mental block a th' ann. Tha iad dìreach a' smuaintinn nach eil còir Gàidhlig a bhith aige… Feumaidh gu bheil mental block sa cheann aig a h-uile duine. Associateidh iad Gàidhlig le feadhainn ach chan associate iad e le feadhainn eile.

(I'm sure it's just a mental block. They just think that he can't have Gaelic… There must be a mental block in everyone's head. They associate Gaelic with some but they don't associate it with others.)

She illustrated the strength of these associations by relating how for the first six months of her acquaintance with a new relation by marriage she had persisted in speaking Gaelic to her, without noticing that she was always replied to in English:

I just assumed that because she had lived here all her life she would have it… I just never remembered to speak to her in English.

Margaret related similar experiences for her teenage son. He is keen to speak Gaelic, but is sometimes frustrated to find that other senior members of the community speak English to him. It often takes time for the realization to dawn that he would prefer to speak Gaelic:

When some of the adults have realised – and maybe that's the key word, "realised" – that he is speaking Gaelic, they've turned to me and said "Oh, isn't that lovely. He is speaking Gaelic." It's like it's just clicked that he's actually speaking Gaelic to them.

Fiona and Alasdair, while welcoming learners' attempts to speak Gaelic to them, admitted occasionally switching the conversation to English in order to ease the flow of communication. Learners' difficulties with pronunciation sometimes made them hard to understand. In Alasdair's words,

Tha duine no dhà ann – tha leithid de thrioblaid ann le fuaimneachadh nach eil thu gan tuigsinn. Tha thu a' tionndadh chun Bheurla airson faochadh.

(There are one or two people – there's so much difficulty with pronunciation that you don't understand them. You turn to English for relief.)

Other participants, both learners and fluent speakers, also made reference to a deeper underlying issue – how to keep a conversation going when the learner may have only very limited Gaelic resources on which to draw. Catherine expressed the problem concisely when describing difficulties she faced when talking to a boy in Gaelic-medium education who was from an English-speaking home:

Tha an còmhradh agad – cha mhòr nach eil e artificial. Feumaidh tu a bhith a' smuaintinn mu dheidhinn. "Seadh, dè nist a tha mi a' dol a ràdh ris?"… Tha barrachd obair ann.

(Your conversation – it's almost artificial. You have to think about it. "Right, what am I going to say to him now?"… There's more work in it.)

Flora made special mention of one neighbour who was particularly helpful:

He speaks to me in Gaelic. He is a teacher. He recognizes the thirst in me for it. And he speaks to me in Gaelic for as long as I can sustain the conversation. And I value that.

As a retired teacher herself Flora recognised the teaching skills and dedication of a fellow professional who made it possible for her to hold a sustained conversation despite her relatively limited competence.

Angus, who makes it his business to help adults learn Gaelic, summed up the demands placed on the fluent speaker in a single sentence:

Feumaidh tu bhith tuigseach air daoine a tha ag ionnsachadh.

(You have to understand people who are learning.)

3.3.3 Summary

Two positive points need to be emphasised at the outset. Firstly, Gaelic learners reported good experiences of finding opportunities to use the language in the local community. Secondly, fluent speakers expressed considerable good will towards helping learners.

In the context of maximising Gaelic learning and use through conversational interaction a number of disparate points were made.

At a functional level, learners reported how the use of some tact and diplomacy in negotiating the use of Gaelic in conversation was amply rewarded, and elaborated some of the successful techniques they used. Furthermore, the more fluent and familiar the learner's Gaelic, the more likely it is that the conversation will be sustained. Intelligible pronunciation may be particularly important in this respect.

At an affective level, there was quite common acknowledgement from learners of the level of potential imposition on fluent speakers that a desire to use Gaelic, whether explicit or implicit, might entail. Such a demand might expose a fluent speaker's underconfidence in their own Gaelic, or at least their uncertainty as to what sort of Gaelic the learner wanted to experience. It might also require, or seem to require, a level of self-awareness with regard to the deliberate crossing or maintenance of language boundaries that a fluent bilingual might not habitually exercise.

Furthermore, fluency in the language is not sufficient on its own. Particularly in a situation where there is an imbalance in skill levels between participants in a conversation, the fluent speaker may feel a responsibility to work harder in order to sustain it. This is a skill in itself, which it may take even professional teachers some years of practice to develop, and will depend on many factors including an ability to empathise with the learner's position.

3.4 Other Issues

At the end of each interview participants were asked if they would like to raise any other points not yet discussed. Among the individual views expressed were the need for a Gaelic school in Uist, a coherent education policy which would place much greater emphasis on Gaelic, closer and more effective engagement of Gaelic development bodies with the local community, and a dislike of listening to what was considered to be an arcane and formal register of Gaelic frequently heard on Gaelic radio news. In subsequent debate, the new numbering system in Gaelic was cited as an example of a significant mismatch of use and expectation between learners and fluent speakers.

A number of participants also expressed concern over aspects of national policy on Gaelic and its treatment in the media, or over the effects they might have. While value could be seen in some instances of providing written Gaelic signage in some public places, or translating public information leaflets (for example relating to health and wellbeing), there might be costs entailed beyond the purely financial in terms of a perceived backlash. Donald was concerned about a vision of Gaelic as a national

language, as propounded by "Gaelic extremists", that might tend to "force" the language on people who aren't interested in it:

> I quite like seeing Gaelic signs in Edinburgh, but I don't like it if the person next to me is going "Bloody Gaelic speakers. Who the hell do they think they are imposing their language on us!"

Flora was also concerned over a "militant" form of Gaelic use, describing an experience at an open public event in Gaelic at which neither simultaneous interpreting facilities were provided, nor any sequential summaries in English:

> I think there are certain people who are too militant, and that's off-putting because you're made to feel inadequate, and that Gaelic is exclusive.

On a positive note, several participants took encouragement from signs of a movement back to Gaelic in the community or within their own family. Alasdair noted a tendency on the part of his grown-up children to use more Gaelic now than they ever did when younger. Angus made a similar observation about peers from his schooldays:

> Bhiomaid a' bruidhinn sa Bheurla san sgoil, ach a-nist tha sinn a' bruidhinn sa Ghàidhlig gun for againn air.

> (We would speak English at school, but now we speak Gaelic without thinking about it.)

Margaret reported anecdotal evidence that even young people of school age were re-evaluating their attitude to Gaelic, quoting a secondary school teacher:

> "You know, in a way, it's becoming quite cool to speak Gaelic again now."

Several of the incoming learners were also keen to record their general appreciation of the social and community values they perceived in the local Gàidhealach culture, values which could find expression in either Gaelic or English, reporting anecdotes or impressions which had affected them deeply.

4. Conclusion

This project set out to elicit and document a range of perceptions held by members of the Uist community with a declared interest in supporting Gaelic, be they learners (new or experienced) or fluent speakers, incomers (short or long term) or lifelong residents. Each has a record of involvement in Gaelic-related activity in the community which demonstrates their commitment to the language, as does their willingness to take part in this research study. Whether or not these perceptions are universally well-informed may be open to discussion, but they are sincerely expressed by people of good will, and so deserve serious consideration.

In the above Findings section I have quoted verbatim extensively from their interviews in order to let their own voices be "heard", as far as that is possible and consistent with the need to present the wealth of data elicited in an organised and coherent manner.

The overall picture presented in that section is, inevitably, a snapshot in time. A high and immediate priority is to reflect that picture back to the participants themselves and through them to the wider community, through the various social networks in which they participate and act. A version of this report will therefore be made available online or in hard copy, and circulated for local consideration and discussion. It is to be hoped that this process will help to inform, identify or define fresh steps that individuals and groups can take, in order to help the community develop further its close and dynamic relationship with the Gaelic language.

To that end, the summary of findings for each research question might finally be usefully examined against the key priority areas identified by the Soillse research network, under whose auspices the study has been conducted. These are Gaelic in the family and the community, Gaelic in education, and public policy in relation to Gaelic revitalisation. While the focus of this study has been on eliciting key issues in the local community, using these headings as a framework through which to view or analyse the findings may also provide a basis for considering how local models developed here might be transferable to other situations.

4.1 Gaelic in the Family and in the Community

A generally observed weakening of Gaelic in family and community life may be attributable to a range of factors, but a clear message from this study is that individual and community confidence (or the lack of it) in Gaelic has an important bearing on the degree to which it is used, and passed on to new learners. In a society in which schooled literacy is highly prized, a disinclination to read or write Gaelic may lead to an undervaluing of Gaelic skills in general, which in turn may tend to inhibit even its oral use and so further undermine confidence. This is a cycle of negative expectation which will demand some form of re-evaluation of the importance of literacy in order to be broken. There would seem to be at least two options. Fluent speakers who can't or don't read or write might decide to change that status or habit, one with which they may have been tolerably comfortable for many decades, or they might choose to develop a more nuanced appreciation of their already existing oral skills in Gaelic, and simply value them for what they really are. While the second option may be sufficient, the two need not be mutually exclusive.

Similarly, in the context of universal bilingualism amongst Gaelic speakers, and the pervasive code-mixing behaviour which naturally accompanies it, it is at least an open question as to whether fluent Gaelic speakers in general do value the additional skills they possess (in comparison with English-only monolinguals) as highly as they might. Adopting a more positive attitude towards bilingualism is not necessarily a simple step, however, as code-mixing, in particular, may be viewed by some in a negative light.

So the obstacles in the way of community-wide confidence building in Gaelic are by no means insignificant. However, identifying them and bringing them to attention may be a necessary and useful first step in finding a way to deal with them, minimally within the local community here in Uist, but also perhaps on a wider scale.

4.2 Gaelic in Education

The focus of this report, in respect of both Gaelic use and Gaelic learning, has been on how people perceive what happens outside schools in adult life. Any lessons in relation to education therefore pertain, in the first instance, to adult learning, particularly in informal, autonomous, or "learner-directed" settings. Encouragement must be taken from the reports of positive experiences with fluent speakers by learners trying to practise what Gaelic they know in the community. Equally, the genuinely good will expressed towards learners by fluent speakers must be considered a good foundation on which to build.

This is not to minimise the challenges, however, that both learners and fluent speakers need to overcome in order to successfully negotiate a comfortable exchange in Gaelic. Learners, in addition to mustering the best Gaelic they can manage, need to display patience and tact, and some understanding of the extra demands they may be placing on their interlocutors. Fluent speakers, in turn, are required to show confidence in their own skills, make conscious decisions (to which they may not be accustomed) about language choice, and optimally be able to modify their own output to suit the comprehension level of the learner, while at the same time bearing a disproportionate load of the effort required to sustain the conversational exchange.

This is a complex set of demands which it would be quite unreasonable to expect every fluent speaker to take on, (and those that do might well benefit from some form of ongoing external support). However, the language skills that every fluent speaker has may be exploitable in other ways than just through face-to-face interaction, as the local Island Voices project (to which many of the participants in this research project also contributed) has already demonstrated, through the creation of online and DVD recordings which may not only serve the needs of adult independent learners but also supplement organised provision in both colleges and, indeed, schools.

As already noted, the new media are being put to use in the community, with new spaces for young people's Gaelic literacy skills being found on social networking platforms like Facebook, for example. There may be significant multimedia potential for this kind of activity to expand and diversify, and so establish a new and valued place also for the vital oral skills of older fluent speakers to occupy and develop.

4.3 Gaelic Revitalisation

The research questions addressed in this study were developed in response to issues that have made themselves apparent at the local level in Uist. Its main purpose is to help the Gaelic-supporting community here move towards a fresh or renewed definition of its current position, and indicate potential paths forward for development. It follows that the primary actors in any response to the findings will rightly be located in the local community, and their actions directed to answering locally defined needs.

Having said that, there is also an awareness of a national agenda for Gaelic development, aspects of which have been viewed with concern by some contributors to the study. Notwithstanding such doubts, the national planning process for Gaelic has the potential to exert a positive influence on the local situation, especially if it is flexible enough to respond meaningfully to locally articulated needs and priorities. It may not be over-presumptive to suggest that some issues identified in this study may have implications for other communities too, particularly those communities which have a long-established and still unbroken tradition of speaking Gaelic.

In that light, two interlocking issues in particular might fruitfully occupy the further consideration of Gaelic planners and policy makers at a wider or national level, as well as of Gaelic activists who aspire to influence such processes. Firstly, there is a question relating to clarity of vision, in terms of the ultimate goals of the Gaelic development enterprise. Given that bilingualism is deemed to be, and is presented as, a legitimate and desirable accomplishment for Gaelic learners and speakers, then by definition some sort of relationship is implied with English (and/or Scots) as the other language (or languages) in the equation. There is a wide range of constituencies and interests that have a stake in Gaelic development, so it is no doubt a highly demanding task to present a coherent and unconflicted picture of the role that English/Scots skills can or should play in supporting Gaelic skills. The cost of not completing it, however, is that the place of the "other tongue" in the bilingual Gaelic world may remain curiously undefined and unlegitimised, a situation which may continue to feed the kind of insecurities at local level that have been documented in this study.

Secondly, in a context where high proportions of the most accomplished Gaelic speakers either can't or don't habitually read or write it, consideration might also be given to the proper place accorded, whether explicitly or implicitly, to the written word in Gaelic in processes of public consultation on, and discussion and dissemination of, Gaelic plans and developments. In a context where the legitimacy of using written English may be contested, or at best ill-defined, then non-literate Gaelic speakers may remain disconnected, through doubt or insecurity, from processes to which their voices could, and ideally should, make an important contribution.

4.4 Next Steps

The final points above are made at a high level of generality without being addressed to any particular constituency or body. If they help to inform effective strategic planning and decision-making on a wider stage, so much the better. In the meantime, there is work to do in Uist.

It is to be hoped that this report can play a useful part in establishing a clear picture of how the related issues of Gaelic use and Gaelic learning in the community are viewed locally. As already noted, the work of this study cannot be regarded as complete at least until such time as the findings are presented back to the contributors and other community members, with an opportunity for further discussion. From this discussion a range of possible follow-on actions and initiatives may emerge that might be undertaken by various organisations or individuals.

It would be premature to anticipate the outcomes of that discussion. However, to the extent that further research can support community initiatives and actions, it may well be that a follow-up study or studies may be justified, for example looking at patterns of Gaelic use by individuals on a daily basis, or evaluating any initiatives aimed at stimulating closer engagement with new media.

Hopefully research of this nature can contribute to a process of community level awareness-raising and empowerment which will see renewed energy injected into Gaelic learning and use in Uist.

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