

At workshops, in e-mails to our web site, and at community events, we often have conversations with people who want to learn the Irish language, and who eventually say:

I wish we had a group like yours where I live, so I could take lessons. There isn't anything like that around me.

We can fix that . . . Or, I should say, **you** can fix that.

YOU CAN GET STARTED NOW!

If you want to learn Irish, working with a study buddy or several colleagues can be enormously valuable (and we have some research to support that). It is much easier to keep going, to get back to the language week after week, when you know you're going to see some friends who are trying to do the same thing. Social support will often contribute more to student success than, say, great materials or textbooks.

But how do you get a group of people to study Irish together?

You start the group.

Yup, you, the person reading this. Not some language expert who is suddenly going to move to your town, or some native speaker of Irish who drops out of the sky. You, *even if you don't have a word of Irish right now.*

Sound crazy? Well, there are crazier things.

For instance, how long have you been waiting for that Irish teacher to magically appear? However long it is, I think you can see the trend: keep waiting for that teacher, and you won't do much more than keep waiting. So if you *want* to look back, a few years from now, and say, "I would've liked to learn Irish, if only someone had to come to teach me," then just keep waiting. That seems like a crazy thing to do to me!

On the other hand, you could be realistic. Assume that no one will rescue you, and **you** have to take charge of building social support for your efforts to learn the language. After all, if you get a group started, and a year later a wonderful Irish teacher moves in next door to you, what have you lost?

Why it works

A group makes you more effective on your own, through

YES, I MEAN YOU!

Will Kenny

others. Remember that you still must review and practice on your own time.

Of course, many of our readers have tried to make progress in the language just using books and tapes and similar tools. One common problem is that they don't always have the explanations they need, in the form they need them, to understand some of the trickier parts of language – and prospective students often view that as the greatest obstacle they face.

In reality, the biggest problem when you're learning on your own is that **you don't keep at it.** You "mean" to work on it, but life intervenes and before you know it, three weeks, four weeks, even a couple of have passed since the last time you really worked on your Irish.

Having a group changes the math a little, making those long gaps a little rarer. And fortunately, when somebody else has a different perspective, or a different style of learning, you may find that talking it over together makes things a little clearer. *Sharing your confusion, if you will, adds a little clarity.*

BUT . . . BUT . . . BUT

Even if we haven't scared you off yet and you're still reading along, I can almost feel the resistance. "Who, me?" you say. Of course, you have many objections:

But I don't know enough about Irish!

Repeat after me: **"organizing a group is different from teaching a language."** Getting a group started means getting the word out that there is a place to meet and a

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time for people who are interested in the language to get together. It means reminding people of when you meet, and when you're going to skip a session, perhaps because of a holiday or major event. It might mean looking for opportunities to do something special occasionally – go to a workshop together, for instance, where you can share the driving and have some familiar faces around you. It might even mean eventually looking for an opportunity to bring a teacher to you, once a year, or every few months, to give a little extra help.

I'll wager that most of you reading this, if asked, could organize a group to talk about safety in your neighborhood, or a knitting circle, or a reading club. Those may not be your interests, but it wouldn't sound like something impossible to do.

Well, Irish **is** your interest! There's not much difference between organizing a knitting circle or a book club, and organizing a study group. The book club does not have to be run by the best reader, or the best-read person. It is held together by people who have figured out that getting together with some friends, and talking about what they're reading, creates a better chance of *actually*

reading the books they "mean to read", than if they just rely on good intentions and "willpower".

Similarly, it's easy to imagine that someone who isn't an expert knitter might like to form a group to get regular practice, and perhaps get some ideas from other knitters. The point is that by working with others, you not only get helpful ideas, the social cohesion of the group makes sure that you don't put down your craft for weeks on end, getting so rusty that you have to relearn everything.

All of that applies to an Irish study group.

You aren't committing yourself to teaching anybody anything.! What you are doing is improving your chances at sticking with it. You're creating an environment that helps you be more successful, compared to just studying alone.

But so-and-so is much better at the language, so s/he should be running a group . . .

After you form your group, you may discover that another student is better at the language. That doesn't mean that that person is the best person to run a group. Nor does it remove *your* responsibility to build social support for your own efforts.

Most of us have met knowledgeable people who are either not great communicators, or not great managers. The best language skills do not automatically translate into teaching ability, and neither teaching ability nor great language skills necessarily imply organization, administration, and management types of skills.

You want your group to be driven by the person who is best at ensuring that people get together regularly and work together in a supportive environment. Whether that person is the best or the worst student in your group is irrelevant.

Think in terms of roles. There may be someone who gets people to meet regularly, someone else who usually knows the answers to language questions, and so on. Don't confuse these roles.

And again, don't wait for your ideal organizer to show up, anymore than you should wait for a teacher to miraculously appear. Make it *your personal responsibility* to get something started. And once you have a group, if it turns out that someone else has the skills and interests to make sure the group thrives, thank your lucky stars, and follow that person's lead.

But no one else is interested in Irish in my area . . .

Really? How did you find that out? If you mean,

I already have a study group! What does this have to do with me?

Bless their little hearts, some people take the initiative to organize occasional extra meetings outside of their regular classes with their leaders or instructors. If you want to make more rapid progress in the language, or consolidate some of the things you've learned, perhaps you can get together with a few of your classmates in between regular classes, now and then. It's a great chance to practice what you know.

After all, if you enjoy Irish, why not enjoy it a little more often?

Pulling an extra session together is much like pulling together a new study group, and the same advice generally applies.

- Don't sit back and expect your group leader or instructor to manage your progress toward the language. Real progress in the language happens *between classes*, when people study, practice, and apply what they've heard during the regular meeting.
- It doesn't *have* to take a lot of extra work or time. Set one weekend morning a month, with several of your classmates, to get together and go over recent lessons. Perhaps some of you work close together and can meet for coffee before going home one evening, every couple of weeks.
- Don't try to get *everyone* in class together for a second meeting. Just find a couple of people who share your interests, location, or style, and create a routine for touching the language together, between classes.

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you haven't bumped into many, that's not a surprise. But until you investigate, and make a sustained effort to find those other "lurkers", you don't really know.

One thing we have seen, over and over again, is how people pop up in moderately sized communities who think they're the only ones interested in the language. Then they get something going and discover that there have been other people sitting on the sidelines, wishing there were a way to study Irish but with no idea how to get started.

In fact, when I look at many of the groups I personally know, in a region covering several states, most of them – including this one, Gaeltacht Minnesota – were formed when someone was looking for a teacher, but couldn't find one. They kept asking around, looking for Irish instruction, and collected, along the way, a group of classmates. Many of these groups have carried on for quite a number of years, decades even, and have turned out some students with fairly high levels of ability in the language.

And it only takes a few students to be worth the effort. If you could meet on a consistent basis with just two or three other people, it could pay off handsomely in greatly increased time spent working with your study materials.

If you really can't get together with anyone and have to work by e-mail or phone, **schedule contact!** You can e-mail each other with questions and ideas anytime, of course – but make sure you build in a *scheduled* contact on a particular day, at a particular time. Without that scheduled commitment, it is much more difficult to maintain regular contact with your classmate and with the language.

HOW DO I . . .

How do I find other students for our group?

This can be challenging, without a doubt, and depends a lot on your geography. You may be in a moderately sized community, or in a small town or rural region. Even in these more remote locations, however, you may be able to draw on surrounding communities to find people who share your interest. After all, people who are trying to learn something are probably willing to drive half an hour, once every two weeks, to meet with a group.

Commit yourself to relentlessly getting the word out

about your interest in the language. First, piggyback on any Irish events, should they occur, in your region. (I.e., St. Patrick's Day). There may be a dance competition close to where you are, where people with an interest in things Irish are likely to gather. Some employers or government entities hold "ethnic festivals" of various kinds. I know I've found myself at the "Irish table" at lunchtime events for county employees, school festivals, and some larger companies.

Next, go back to thinking about how you would publicize any other interest, whether it was politics or stamp collecting. Stick notes on community bulletin boards in coffee shops or supermarkets. Call your local newspaper, and get interviewed about your interest in this unusual language! Let people in public schools, local colleges and universities, know of your pursuits. Some memberships (public radio, service groups, etc.) include free ads in a newsletter, or an on-line bulletin board where you can post notices. Give some flyers to local travel agents so people who are traveling to Ireland know about you.

How often should we meet?

Each group has to work this out for themselves. People's schedules, the strength of their interest in the language, and geography all play a part. The key is to be flexible, but consistent.

➤ **Consistency** comes from meeting on a fairly regular schedule. Sometimes you have to shift or skip a meeting because of vacations, holidays, or other factors. But routine is one of your greatest friends, in learning a language. If you get it built into your schedule on a routine basis, you're much more likely to

show up at every meeting, and to reap the benefits of having group support.

➤ **Flexibility** means that you adopt the meeting schedule that is most likely to produce that consistency. Some groups may meet for a couple of hours at a time, others for an hour. Some might meet weekly, some every two or

Key Points

- It is up to **you** to start something.
- If you already have a group, you can apply these ideas to get in a little extra review outside of class.
- You don't have to know the language to get a study group going.
- Approach it as you would organizing any other community group.
- Regular, routine meetings times and social support are more valuable than materials, knowledge of the language, or an official "teacher".
- You can keep waiting for someone else to do it. How is that working for you so far?

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three weeks. Some might gather at a coffee shop on the way home from work, others might use a room in a library or church, or in someone's office, for an evening or weekend meeting at a certain time.

There's no formula for how long, how often, where, or what time of day you meet. And you may make some adjustments as your group is coming together. But keep your focus on building a consistent pattern that draws people to attend regularly. Your goal is regular contact with the language, and reliably getting together with your group is more important than the quantity of time you spend together in any one meeting.

What do we use for study materials?

The question of what materials to use is, unfortunately, one I'm will not answer for you here. Many people would like to know THE book or course that guarantees success. If you find it, let me know.

For most of us, waiting for perfect books and courses to appear is a lot like waiting for that perfect teacher to move next door. *Students who get the most out of a mediocre book will do more with the language than people who do little with a great book!*

There are two other reasons I'm not giving you THE answer to your materials question:

1. You're probably going to start with a few people (including yourself) who may have purchased materials already, to study on their own. There's no reason to throw away these materials and start with something else. In fact, having a variety of sources available gives you a chance to compare explanations of the same topics.
2. People have different styles and preferences. What works well in one group may not entuse another group.

Work with what you have, to start. *Stick with the materials you have long enough to get everything you can out of them.* If you're keep starting over with something new, it is probably holding you back.

PLEASE, GO FOR IT!

It does take some time, patience, and persistence to build a study group, but it isn't any harder than forming any other kind of group. At first, you may have to settle for infrequent meetings, phone or e-mail contact, and other forms of support if you can't meet regularly.

But it's worth it. We know many students who have studied for years as part of a group. The number who have managed to stick with it long enough to make real progress, entirely on their own, is a lot smaller.

It all starts with a decision. The choices are simple.

1. You can do nothing until divine intervention provides you with a teacher and guide to the language.

2. You can work on your own and keep telling yourself that you have to try harder, to study more frequently and more systematically.
3. Or you can make some new friends who will help you keep at it,

I may not know you as an individual, but I'm fairly confident in predicting that the third option is most likely to take you a farther, and a little faster, in your understanding of the Irish language.

So, if I bump into you a year or two from now, what do you want to say?

"I have a long way to go, but I can definitely see some progress. . . ."

or

"Oh, if only we had a study group or an Irish teacher here . . ."

Your choice.

External sources of help

Beyond your own group, take advantage of opportunities to get a little boost now and then. Going to a workshop is an excellent way to get some things cleared up, get a good injection of practice in the language, and make contacts that you can return to for help.

You can also find many an online forum where Irish is discussed, and beginners hang out. Some of these are more helpful than others, but it's another way to get a different perspective on what you're struggling with.

Some people have even developed e-mail relationships with advanced students or instructors who can help answer questions that arise as they get into more difficult topics.

But none of these can compare with having a regular meeting in your area, or a friend and studymate, either at the end of a phone line, or an e-mail or instant message address. And if you keep at this for an extended period of time – again, something you're much more likely to do in the group than on your own – you'll often find that some member of your group will demonstrate a facility for language, and that more advanced reference materials and resources become useful to you once you have a foundation in the basics. The personal support is what makes it possible to get to a level where a broader range of contacts and resources is useful to you.