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PRESS RELEASE

'Sing songs to learn Gaelic', say education experts
Importance of music in language acquisition stressed as Mod gets underway

A second language can be learned more easily when it is taught through music, is the message being given out this weekend as the Royal National Mod gets underway in Lochaber.

Competitions are open to fluent Gaelic speakers and learners, with many art forms celebrated including traditional music, recitation and most famously song.

The children's competitions will begin in Fort William tomorrow (Saturday, Oct 14) and as the competitors make their final preparations, the team involved in teaching a new generation of Gaelic learners are stressing the importance of using song, whenever possible, to maximise the chances of getting that new language to 'stick'.

Jackie Mullen, a consultant trainer for the Go! Gaelic programme being run by Gaelic educational resources organisation Stòrlann, has seen first hand how effective music is as a learning tool.

The Go! Gaelic programme includes a comprehensive programme of resources, found online at www.go-gaelic.scot, that are used in primary schools across the country to teach some Gaelic to children who are in English Medium Education.

However, Go! Gaelic also incorporates an 18-day training programme specially aimed at teachers who also want to learn some Gaelic in order to teach it with confidence in the classroom.

Jackie Mullen delivers some of the training programmes and is also a member of trad band Folky MacFolk Face. Recent events in the classroom have reinforced her belief that using music and song improves the chances of language learning success for both adults and children.

She recalled day four of the 18-day programme, when a cohort of teachers on the programme were trying to learn introductory questions, such as 'Where do you live?' (Càit a bheil thu a' fuireach?) and 'How old are you?' (Dè an aois a tha thu?)

They had been taught the questions in Gaelic and were being asked to recall them. Jackie noticed they had no trouble remembering the questions they had been taught in song form — but struggled with the others.

The songs Jackie used in the training included Dè an t-ainm a th' ort? (Where do you live?) which is one of the song sheets included in the Go! Gaelic programme, and Dè an àireamh fòn a th' agad? (What's your phone number?) which she wrote herself for teaching purposes. There are 20 songs included in Go! Gaelic.

Jackie said: "Everything that I'd put into song, they remembered. They found it more difficult to remember the questions that hadn't been delivered to them in song, in class.

"All of them had much easier access to the language if it was something that I'd delivered to them via music. It just proves the point of what I'm always saying... if you can sing it, you can say it.

"That's become my mantra when I'm delivering a course to teach Gaelic."

Jackie pointed out: "How many song lyrics can you recall, compared to how many poems you can recite? It's so much easier to recall song lyrics and I'm sure that's because of the music."

She added: "When teachers are using Go! Gaelic as a resource, I'd really emphasise the importance of using the songs. Use the songs first and foremost. Don't bypass them.

"Computers can go down and crash but if you've got a song in your head then you're home and dry. Also, the phrases in the songs are part of the core language that needs to be taught."

Of young learners, Jackie said: “It’s probably their favourite element of learning the language. Children love to sing, they’re always really happy when they sing, and while they’re doing it they are learning the language.”

One of the teachers on the 18-day training programme is Shona Henderson, depute head at Chyrnside Primary in Glasgow. She said it was “amazing” to experience this difference in recall. “It was clear that the questions they were actually managing to remember were the ones that we had done in song,” she said. “Music is really helping me to remember. It’s getting it in there.” She added: “Because I don’t have a musical background, it wouldn’t have been something that I’d regularly use in my teaching but I would definitely use song now, if I could. I’ve even asked my daughter if I can borrow her ukulele to try and learn.”

The findings are borne out by research, including a study from California State University which found that music helps students acquire a second language for a number of reasons.

Mainly because it is enjoyable, music relaxes learners, lessens inhibitions and makes learners more attentive and receptive to learning a second language. The songs themselves usually contain authentic examples of the language and success in singing also boosts confidence.

Donald W Morrison, Stòrlann chief executive, shared a personal memory of how important song had been in his own language development.

He said: “My earliest mother tongue recollect is a snippet of a lullaby, often sung by my mother as she rocked me to sleep as an infant. This stark lullaby bemoaned the fact that Winter had swept all horses and cows off the land – not the most inspiring of stories – but the words, in their original order, have stayed with me for well over half a century!

“Gaelic language and its associated art forms of story and song make for a rich trove of material for learners. Many of the competitors at the Mod will have commenced on their own personal journey to Gaelic fluency through songs and music.

“Go!Gaelic uses the fun learning tool of the song to good advantage. A collection of 20 catchy little numbers carry the core vocabulary to the learner’s mind and, through the added rhythm and rhyme, it tends to stay there. In a sense, our young learners sing the language into their own heads and by so doing — in corridors, cars and kitchens — they pass the songs on.

“As the lands of Lochaber rings out to the sounds of Gaelic at the National Mod, I am certain that Gaelic language acquisition will have a prominent place on the winning team!”

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