



## Cross-bordering: Applying the Celtic notion of Anam Cara to teaching academic English

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### Abstract

The late Irish scholar-poet John O'Donohue revived the notion of *anam cara*, Gaelic for soul friend, in the 1990s. This paper recounts how I have applied the principle to teaching academic English to non-native learners in university settings. My first step was to consider how to cross the border of discourse between the discourses of philosophy and poetry on the one hand with the discourse of learning academic English on the other. My next step was to focus on helping learners set and meet learning goals. During this process in the classroom, I referred to linguistic insecurity, a well-developed direction in sociolinguistics, and then suggested that learners overcome their linguistic insecurity by aiming strategically at strengthening their identities as competent users of academic English and solidifying their skill sets. Four handouts explicitly prepared to address these aims are presented at the end.

**Keywords:** *academic writing; language advising; English as a second/foreign language in higher education; linguistic insecurity; multilingual language learners*

### Preface

Doris and I met during a ten-day retreat in Switzerland for senior professionals in 1999, where she impressed me greatly with her compassion, lucidity, and organization. When I moved to Bern in 2002, she began to ask me to work with some of her colleagues and students on texts they needed to write in academic English. Doris's interest in supporting them in this pioneering way impressed me even more and quickly led me to discover her dedication to quality teaching in higher education. I observed how she challenged, praised, and acknowledged students and colleagues, including myself, wanting to bring out the best in those she worked with. Doris embodies not only a master teacher, but an *anam cara*, a 'soul friend' who helps those around her become more of who they are. I wrote my contribution in honor of our *anam cara* friendship.

### Introduction

The late multilingual Irish poet and Hegelian scholar John O'Donohue revived the notion of *anam cara* in his best seller *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* (1997).

*In the Celtic tradition, there is a beautiful understanding of love and friendship. One of the fascinating ideas here is the idea of soul love; the old Gaelic term for this is *anam cara*. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul and *cara* is the word for friend. So *anam cara* in the Celtic world was the soul friend. In the early Celtic Church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion or spiritual guide was called an *anam cara*. *Anam cara* was originally someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the *anam cara*, you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality, and category. You were joined in an ancient and*

*eternal way with the 'friend of your soul'. The Celtic understanding did not set limitations of space or time on the soul. There is no cage for the soul. The soul is a divine light that flows into you and into your Other. The art of belonging awakened and fostered a deep and special companionship.*<sup>i</sup>

The context in which he set this friendship was human biography, human destiny.

*... Each one of us is doomed and privileged to be an inner artist who carries and shapes a unique world.*

*Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. Nowhere else is there such intimate and frightening access to the mysterium. Friendship is the sweet grace, which liberates us to approach, recognize and inhabit the adventure.... Friendship is a creative and subversive force. It claims that intimacy is the secret law of life and universe. The human journey is a continuous act of transfiguration. If approached in friendship, the unknown, the anonymous, the negative, and the threatening gradually yield their secret affinity with us. As an artist, the human person is permanently active in this revelation. The imagination is the great friend of the unknown. Endlessly, it invokes and releases the power of possibility. Friendship, then, is not to be reduced to an exclusive or sentimental relationship; it is a far more extensive and intensive force.*<sup>ii</sup>

John O'Donohue implies above that *anam cara* is a longer-term friendship, but my observations of teachers and learners have led me to perceive that a close and meaningful friendship supporting learning can develop in and for the short term as well. Informally, for example, this can happen when one colleague shows another the intricacies of a new language-learning link, updated software or a new electronic device. Formally, a teacher and a learner can form an *anam cara* friendship when there is especially deep learning during a course or even one or two coaching sessions.

Let us, like O'Donohue, suppose that we humans are indeed inner artists carrying and shaping a unique inner world and that the presence of another human somehow catalyzes that artistry. This thought of one catalyzing another has helped me to uncover a dimension of friendship in the process of learning-teaching between adults.<sup>iii</sup> I have been wondering for more than ten years how we

can act in friendship, even if briefly or subtly, to cross the border between the known and the unknown. In common educational parlance, I wonder especially about setting and meeting learning goals. How as inner artists do we and might we shape our unique world to create the inner space for what we have set out to learn? Further, when we are in the world of learning, what do we need from teachers so we can expand our world to encompass our potential as it unfolds: becoming who we are not yet, knowing what we do not yet know, doing what we cannot yet do? When we are in the world of teaching, what do we need from learners so we can develop the skills to provide and be a catalyzing presence? In this sense, we as both learners and teachers cross borders. When we are learning, we must cross the internal border from the known into the unknown, whereas when we are teaching, we must cross the external border between ourselves and another.

Crossing a border can fill us with a sense of adventure when the crossing signifies traveling from a place we know to one we know less well or not at all. The journey from a smaller to a larger self, from the known to an expanded self is just such an adventure, according to a number of mystics and committed spiritual seekers, including John O'Donohue. He knew about crossing borders from his earliest childhood because he was a native Irish (Gaelic) speaker growing up in predominantly English-speaking Ireland. He studied theology and became a priest and was later acclaimed for the depth and beauty of the imagery in his English-language poetry and for his courses, especially in the United States. He also went on to study Hegel and Meister Eckhart in their original German, earning his doctorate from the University of Tübingen (*Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen*). John O'Donohue learned how to cross languages, cultures, disciplines, and countries. I coined the term 'crisscross scholar' to describe such border crossers (Regan 2009 and 2012).

The impetus to apply his notion of soul friendship consciously and attentively to teaching academic English occurred to me while writing my doctoral dissertation because I wanted to understand and observe more about learners crossing the border between the known and the unknown, the smaller and the larger self. Since then, I

have adopted *anam cara* as my basic stance when teaching. My own observations and reflections have led me to see that extending the borders of the self – learning - is both elevating and uplifting and thus a matter of the heart or soul, not the mind or body. This contribution will show how I have understood ‘soul friendship’ and how I have incorporated it into my teaching, crossing borders on diverse levels along the way.

Traditionally, teachers can be models, mentors, authority figures or even tyrants, but it is uncommon to think of a teacher as a friend. To then extend this uncommon idea to the level of the soul is today almost unthinkable because of the strength of secularism in education. Nevertheless, as I wrote my dissertation, I decided to take a bold inner leap to cross the border from these traditional roles to prepare to offer myself to the learners in my everyday teaching as an *anam cara* so they would have additional and external support for reaching their learning goals. I wanted to focus on learners reaching their learning goals because it seemed to be a borderland between their current selves and the expanded selves they were stretching to become. I soon realized, however, first, that learners would think it highly peculiar at best if I offered to be their soul friend and second, that I did not know how to cross the border between the discourse surrounding *anam cara* and the numerous discourses used in teaching academic English. I had reached an impasse.

Some years before, in the 1990s, I had become personally acquainted with the sociolinguists Pascal Singy and Peter Trudgill, both colleagues of mine at the University of Lausanne who had extended William Labov’s work on linguistic insecurity.<sup>iv</sup> At some moment during my search for a way to cross the border from my inner stance to actually introducing *anam cara* into my teaching, I made a link between it and linguistic security. I reasoned that if Pascal Singy and Peter Trudgill could extend Labov’s work to gender differences in French-speakers in Switzerland<sup>v</sup> and to dialects in the United Kingdom,<sup>vi</sup> respectively, I could reverse and extend it to adult non-native users of academic English in learning settings. So I requisitioned ‘linguistic security’ to refer to a learner acquiring sufficient language skills to feel both confident and competent as a user of academic English. In other words, when non-native learners become more competent Eng-

lish users by mastering language features and identifying their strengths and weaknesses, they increase their confidence in themselves and may even begin to extend their identities to include being (budding) non-native authorities on academic English. I viewed linguistic security as a possible way to cross the border between philosophical theology and academic English. The impasse was partially resolved.

In the approximately eight years since I made this link, I have couched the *anam cara* approach to my learners in terms of linguistic security because it can be quickly and easily explained and then grasped by learners who are not linguists. Specifically, early in a course or a coaching relationship, I introduce linguistic insecurity to learners as a long-standing subject in sociolinguistics that examines what makes people feel anxious and self-conscious or lack confidence when using language. I then usually say I see it as my task to help them to cross the border from linguistic insecurity to linguistic security. Sometimes I illustrate this process with my business motto: ‘From basic knowledge to competent use to the art of living in another language.’ In most courses I teach, I ask learners to assess their level in various language skills<sup>vii</sup> first and then identify their strengths and weaknesses. In general, this allows learners to become aware of where they stand in a differentiated way. The next step is to support them as they set (manageable) learning goals that will allow them to strengthen their weaknesses and consolidate their strengths.

In semester-length classes, I then unveil the weekly schedule (Handout 1). The purpose of this handout is for learners to gain an overview of my approach and the course and thus increase their assurance about what the work will be, an indirect step toward linguistic security. They see immediately that there is a clear emphasis on writing, and I explain that writing is the most effective way I know of to gain mastery of routine language. In one semester, I ask students to write about a personal intercultural encounter, whereas in another semester, the focus shifts to professional and academic writing tasks.

To improve writing, feedback is necessary. My feedback in earlier years was based on a handout called the Correction Code because so many learners asked to be corrected. This year, however, when discussing this with a col-

league who teaches along similar lines, I came to see that this gave a misguided signal. Calling the feedback a correction code implied that there were 'right' answers that I knew and that learners did not. Often, however, this was not the case and would not foster learner autonomy and confidence. In addition, 'correction' was given by an authority but if I instead wanted to act out of (soul) friendship, I would need to give learners feedback so they could make their own decisions as to how to incorporate it. My colleague and I decided to rename our feedback handouts the Comment Code to reflect this shift (see Handout 2 for a comment code designed for a one-day academic writing course).

I broach the idea of friendship explicitly in three ways. The first and most thorough-going is, conversely, through the idea of the false friend (from the French *faux ami*), which referred originally to words in different languages that are identical or closely resemble one another but which in fact have substantially different meanings. I have extended the idea to include tenses and other structures that can also lull learners into automatically using them as they would in their native or other second language. For example, I draw the learners' attention to the fact that 'I have read the article' looks similar to constructions in both German and French (*Ich habe den Artikel gelesen* and *j'ai lu l'article*, respectively), but that the English construction refers to present time and is a present tense (present perfect), whereas both the German and French constructions refer to past time and are past tenses (*Perfekt* and *passé composé*, respectively). Because choosing the appropriate verb tense and aspect is so difficult for non-native learners,<sup>viii</sup> learners raise questions about this point frequently during the semester, so I take these opportunities to reinforce understanding of 'false friends.' Learners also regularly use what appear to be false friends in their writing assignments. When they do, I note what the surface error is, for example, the use of the present perfect tense when the simple past tense would be more appropriate, and also raise the question as to whether the error is actually a false friend that occurs at a deeper structural level, i.e., thinking in another language while writing in English. To address this common problem of language management, towards the end of the semester, we look at how to avoid confounding language systems, for which I distribute *Suggestions for Multilin-*

*gual Students: Keeping your languages straight!* (Handout 3).

Friendship is also explicitly addressed in the context of the 'peer tandem,' a term I coined to distinguish it from the traditional learning partnership in which each partner wishes to practice the native language of the other. I developed it as an optional module in semester-length courses for learners whose primary goal was to develop fluency in speaking. In the peer tandem, learners find a partner in the class and meet for the required number of hours in lieu of self-study. Initially, many non-native learners express linguistic insecurity about a peer tandem with another non-native, concerned that they will learn non-standard English. I address this concern from various perspectives. First, I make the distinction between fluency and accuracy clear, suggesting they concentrate on their own fluency and practice accuracy on their own and when they write. Then I share my observation that many non-natives can recognize language errors, even if they do not know how to correct them themselves (that is what reference materials are for). Finally, I draw their attention to the fact that most of those with whom they will speak are not native speakers and that there is an advantage in becoming accustomed to this emerging lingua franca English. Learners have expressed great interest in this option, but only three or four tandems have been formed because many learners do not have compatible schedules. However, those who completed them have reported it was an enriching experience that they would certainly incorporate in their future language learning.

The third way friendship comes directly into play is when I suggest that learners, in the spirit of lifelong learning, develop one or more language friendships. The idea for this has its roots in a conversation I had with one of my sisters a number of years ago. Her family and profession remain her top priorities, but in mid-life, she realized she had neglected a part of herself that gave her heart wings, which was playing team sports. She joined a team and made a commitment to herself to make playing a top priority, but primarily limited to Sunday mornings. The change has been palpable, though subtle. It is clear that she enjoys a deeper level of *joie de vivre* now. As I reflected over the years on how to help learners give their

hearts wings while learning language, expanding into new territories and trying out new parts of themselves, I remembered this conversation and made the crossing once again from my private to my professional life when the thought of language friendships occurred to me. I then also remembered a colleague who had developed a language friendship over more than two decades in a traditional language tandem and then I myself went on to develop a shorter-term friendship with a classmate in a German class. After further reflection, I introduced the idea one semester and noticed it met with interest in the learners, so I have kept it as a regular 'mini' feature in my classes and coaching. It does in fact seem worthwhile to distinguish between those friendships formed by an inarticulate sense of affinity and belonging that are deeply rooted and last a lifetime from other equally significant and genuine friendships that may be limited in time or space or to a particular activity. Anyone who can help us cross the border between our smaller selves and our more expanded ones is indeed a true friend, although perhaps part-time or temporary.

Introducing *anam cara* into academic English has been an ongoing process. Learners who give positive feedback or generously indulge me encourage me to be bolder in my innovations; learners who criticize what I have done or who feel I have gone too far help me to reign in my unbridled enthusiasm so I can listen more deeply to what can be improved or implemented for them. So far, the closest I have been able to come to directly cross the daunting border between being a soul friend and teaching academic English is to refer to the language of poetry. As a way of wrapping up the semester, I turn to poetry to lift learners' hearts and celebrate what they have accomplished by giving each learner a bookmark as a souvenir to remember our time together and their commitment themselves to improve their academic English (Handout 4).

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[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/assessment\\_grid/assessment\\_grid\\_english.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/assessment_grid/assessment_grid_english.pdf)

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### Selected links on linguistic (in)security:

<http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/linginsterm.htm>

<http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/languages/k1250/sectionE/insecure.htm>

<http://www.upf.edu/llengues/en/segureta/>

## Author

Dr. Jeannette Regan is Lecturer for Scientific English at the Language Centre of the bilingual University of Freiburg-Fribourg and at the Centre for Continuing Education, University of Bern. As a freelancer, she offers a variety of services in the area of scientific English, amongst others teaching, editing and coaching. She edits texts of researchers and coaches university faculty, who present in English. Her research focuses on the language management of multilingual academics. Jeannette Regan

studied Political Science at the Universities of Rutgers (A.B.) and Temple (M.A.) and defended her PhD in Psychology entitled "The Dance of Learning: On Encounters in Adult Second-Language Learning" in French at the University of Lausanne; her work was published by Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. She got to

know Prof. Dr. Doris Wastl-Walter in 1999 and advises her research group since 2002 with regard to English language. Moreover, she collaborated in this role in the framework of the SCOPES project "Integrating (Trans)national Migrants in Transition States".

## **Handout 1**

### **The Weekly Workshop**

Many instructors can give out their course syllabus on the first day as a courtesy to students because they already know what subject matter the course will cover. This workshop, however, is slightly different. We are going to create this course together based on your immediate needs and questions and my ability to respond to them. Below you will find as much information as I can give you now about our work together in the coming semester. It should help you decide whether this course will meet your needs and your learning style.

Week 1 Welcome, learning objectives, and IELTS<sup>ix</sup>

Week 2

Week 3 Introduction to self-access center and Writing 1 – professional profile

Week 4 Writing 2 - CV

Week 5 Writing 3 – 40-minute IELTS essay

Week 6 Writing 4 – summary writing

Easter Break

Week 7 Writing 5 – preparing for graphics

Week 8 Writing 6 – writing about graphics

Week 9 Writing 7 – writing to anchor vocabulary

Week 10 Writing 8 – paraphrasing and quotes

Week 11

Week 12 Language friendships

Week 13 Sharing about writing projects; all outstanding work must be handed in

Week 14 Individual 15-minute interviews with course instructor to evaluate and look ahead.

The weekly workshop will include elements from the structure below, but not all of them each week.

- Greeting
- Warm-up
- (Controlled) speaking practice, some based on the IELTS exam

- Wrapping up from the previous week (questions and feedback)
- Attention to academic reading, sometimes based on the IELTS exam
- Listening practice, sometimes based on the IELTS exam
- A sample exercise from material in the self-access center
- Administration and assignments

## **Handout 2**

### **Comment Code**

Please use this code to work through the comments on your text. Feel free to check any questions with me.

acad	The word chosen could be replaced by a more academic word (cf. Academic Word List).
alt	This is an alternative.
art	article use (add, omit or change “a,” “an,” or “the”)
awk	awkward; this isn’t quite the way it’s put in English.
cap	capitalization
ff	false friend (e.g., “sensible” in French vs. “sensibel” in German vs. “sensible” in English; includes tenses, structures, and other language features that look similar but are in fact different)
gr	grammar
lit	Please check with literature in your field. I’m not sure this is OK.
ms	move structure
prep	preposition – incorrect choice or missing
p	punctuation – missing or incorrect punctuation
para	paragraph problem (new paragraph, topic/text body, synonyms/word family, coherence/cohesion, linking ideas within paragraphs)
signpost	signpost (non-use or logical connection/argument development)
st	style problem (also “register”) – either styles are mixed or it is not academic style (examples of other styles: spoken, written, formal, informal, casual, administrative, personal, and impersonal)
sp	spelling
ss	sentence structure
t	tense
tf	text flow – the writing does not flow smoothly from one idea to the next
ts	topic sentence or topic continuity
wf	wrong form, right word (e.g., “actual” for “actually”)
wo	word order
ww	wrong word
??	meaning unclear to me
^	something missing
( )	optional; can be deleted
---	delete, omit

### Handout 3

#### Suggestions for Multilingual Students: Keeping your languages straight!

Making small vocabulary cards and using the *Lernbox* (<http://www.lernbox.net/>) or an online vocabulary trainer like the one at <http://www.dict.cc/> can help students who speak several languages to avoid confusing them by keeping order among them. Below are a number of specific suggestions that have been developed in the context of learning English, German, French, Spanish Italian, Russian, ancient Greek, and Latin.

The idea underlying the suggestions that follow is the importance of noticing whatever is not clear or causes confusion, so that by noting it down and reviewing it regularly, it will become clearer, then will no longer cause confusion, and eventually will be mastered. Regular review, especially a cognitive approach like the *Lernbox* or *dict.cc*'s vocabulary trainer, allows for mastery.

Note irregularities in spelling and grammar that have not been mastered

e.g. 'achieve' but 'perceive' (Rule: 'i' before 'e' except after 'c.')  
'go,' 'went,' and 'gone' 'feel' and 'felt' 'try' and 'tries'

Note comparatives and plurals that have not yet been mastered.

e.g. 'good,' 'better,' and 'best' 'easy,' 'easier,' and 'easiest'

Note useful phrases that occur frequently.

e.g. conduct research do research make mistakes make progress

Note idiomatic phrases.

e.g. in September at noon to drop out

Note a word family together on one card. Also note the word's stress patterns, since they sometimes shift within word families, especially those used frequently in academic contexts.

e.g. O o o o O o o o o o Ooo o o Ooo(o)  
analyze analysis analytical analytically

Note the word's function, if it is confusing, and include examples, if possible.

e.g. 'parking' (noun and verb) 'analyzes' (verb) and 'analyses' (plural noun)

Note stress patterns or pronunciation of words that cause difficulties or are not logical to you.

e.g. 'analysis' or 'develop' in English

Note instances when languages use different forms to express the same idea.

e.g. 'parking' (gerund) in English and 'Parkplätze' (plural noun) in German

Note different meanings together, such as a literal meaning and an ironic or satirical meaning.

e.g. 'She's out to lunch.' = 'She's eating her meal at noontime.'

'It's hard to work with Dan. He's out to lunch.' =

'Dan is a difficult colleague, because he is temporarily not in control of his mental functions.'

A 'false friend' ('faux ami') has a similar form of but different meaning from language the learner already knows.

A false friend can be, for example, a word, expression, verb tense, or pronunciation.

Examples

‘magazine’ in English and ‘magasin’ in French  
‘familiar’ in English      ‘familiär’ in German      ‘familier’ in French  
present perfect tense in English    Perfekt in German    passé composé in French

Note words that are the same in one or more languages but are pronounced differently.

e.g.      ‘analyse’ in British English      and ‘analyse’ in French

Note different usages.

e.g.      ‘information’ in English is uncountable and thus has no plural, but its equivalent in both French and German is frequently plural.

My special thanks go to Carola Blatt, historian and adult educator, who has learned seven languages herself and has been teaching German to both the general public and the academic community in Switzerland for more than twenty years. In an extended conversation in April 2005, she shared with me her approach and specific suggestions for my multilingual students.

#### **Handout 4**

Happily may I walk.

May it be beautiful before me.

May it be beautiful behind me.

May it be beautiful below me.

May it be beautiful above me.

May it be beautiful all around me.

In beauty it is finished.

- Navajo Night Chant

Souvenir of B2 Academic English

<sup>i</sup> Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World, p.35.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>iii</sup> I refer to learning and teaching together for two reasons. The first is that those who teach also learn from their learners and those who learn often teach their teachers, an idea I developed in *The Dance of Learning: On Encounters in Adult Second-Language Learning*. The second is that, in our rapidly changing world, we spend a substantial amount of time today either learning about innovations or teaching them to others, whether in formal or informal situations.

<sup>iv</sup> In 1972, the American sociolinguist William Labov used the term to refer to the situation in which native speakers lack confidence or feel anxious or self-conscious about whether their language usage is sufficiently correct and at a prestigious level.

<sup>v</sup> For example, Pascal Singy's *Les femmes et la langue, L'insécurité linguistique en question* (1998) or *L'objet de l'étude* (2004).

<sup>vi</sup> For one of numerous examples, Peter Trudgill's *Standard English: what it isn't* (1999).

<sup>vii</sup> I ask them to use the self-assessment grid of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/assessement\\_grid/assessment\\_grid\\_english.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/assessement_grid/assessment_grid_english.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, the excellent overview in Larsen-Freeman et al.'s *Helping students make appropriate verb tense-aspect choices*.

<sup>ix</sup> IELTS refers to the International English Language Testing System, which offers placement testing for higher education under the auspices primarily of the British Council. I use some material from exam preparation material so learners become used to the test's format, should they find it useful to take the test outside the classroom situation at some point.