

Teaching

USI REPORT ON THE TEACHING OF IRISH 2021



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

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FOREWORD

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is a bilingual organisation with 374,000 members across the island of Ireland. The Union has language policies that ensure that Irish has a central role in the organisation and that it is used in any and all USI campaigns or publications.

USI has a full time elected role for the Vice-President for Irish that helps the Union in its entirety to promote the Irish language. It is the aim of USI to promote and protect the language, not only at third level but across the island.

USI understands the importance of Irish in our past and in our future, and we believe that the language should have an important role in our society at both a local and national level. USI carries out work in various sectors relating to Irish, both education-related and the promotion of the language and language rights in the wider public.

USI recognises the importance of carry out regular research into the status of Irish in the educational system, particularly with the current demand for reform of the teaching of the subject from preschool to third level via the #Gaeilge4All campaign. English language media in Ireland often discuss Irish becoming an optional subject for the Leaving Certificate and the value of the language as a school subject. Through researching and analysing the public opinion of the language, hard evidence can be shown regarding the status of the language in the education system.

Research carried out by Aoife Ní Dheisigh, Leas-Uachtarán don Ghaeilge AMLÉ 2018-2019. Research compiled and report written by Clíodhna Ní Dhufaigh, Leas-Uachtarán don Ghaeilge AMLÉ 2019-2021.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This report looks at the opinions of third level students regarding the teaching of Irish in the education system. It will focus on the way Irish is taught during the Leaving Certificate and an insight will be provided as regards how effective Irish-language education is in creating proficient Irish speakers.

It is understood however that further research into this topic will be required and that opinions must be gathered regarding Irish in the educational system from preschool to third level. Research is also required into the exemption system for children who have learning requirements. On top of this, research must be done into the Irish course for trainee teachers, particularly at primary level.

This research was carried out between October 2018 and January 2019, with 1,539 people taking part in a survey which was promoted through Students' Unions, na Cumainn Ghaelacha, and Conradh na Gaeilge.

RESEARCH AIMS:

- Provide evidence regarding the urgent need to reform the teaching of Irish in the education system and to put an extra emphasis on the spoken language in the classroom.
- Provide an insight into the varying experiences of the public with Irish in the education system, including people who attended English schools, Irish-medium schools and schools in Gaeltacht areas.
- Highlight the emphasis placed on Irish as a school subject and the emphasis placed on Irish as a living language outside of the classroom.
- Examine the Irish proficiency of students after primary school and after secondary school.

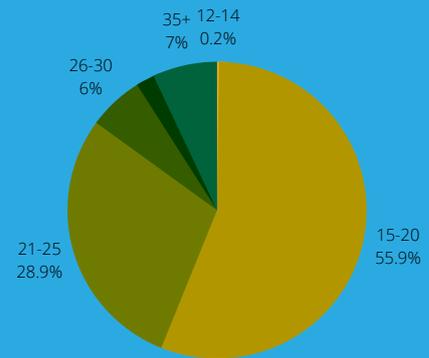
OVERVIEW OF MAIN RESULTS

- 25% said that a significant emphasis was placed on Irish as a school subject and 9% said that no emphasis was placed on Irish when they were in school.
- 54% said that no emphasis was placed on Irish as a living language outside of the classroom.
- After primary school, 22% felt that they were somewhat fluent in the language and 15% believed they were fully fluent.
- After secondary school, 41% felt they were somewhat fluent in the language and 21% believed they were fully fluent.
- Regarding Irish being compulsory in school, 67% felt it should be fully compulsory and 26% felt it should be compulsory up until the Junior Certificate.
- 61% felt the Irish syllabuses helped with some aspects of learning the language, and 33% were of the opinion that the syllabuses didn't help at all with learning the language.
- 72% of participants had a positive opinion regarding Irish-medium schools, and this figure was 94% amongst those who attended Irish-medium schools.
- 77% said they would send their children to an Irish-medium primary school should they have a family in the future.

DEMOGRAPHICS

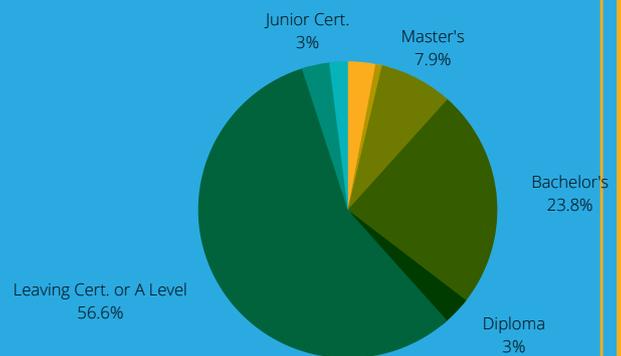
Age groups

- 12-14, 0.19%
- 15-20, 56%
- 21-25, 29%
- 26-30, 6%
- 31-35, 2%
- 36+, 7%



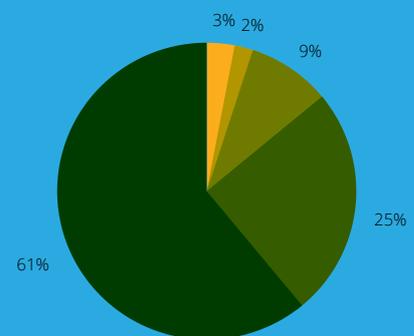
Level of Education

- No qualifications, 3%
- PhD, 0.7%
- Master's Degree 8%
- Bachelor's Degree 24%
- Diploma 3%
- Leaving Certificate or A-Levels 57%
- Junior Certificate or GCSE 3%
- Other 2%



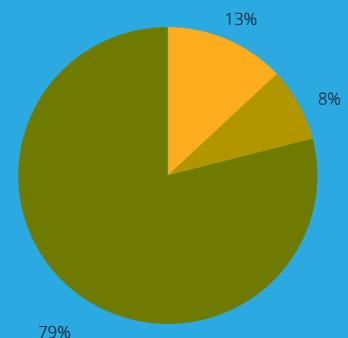
Language spoken at home

- Irish spoken all the time 3%
- Irish spoken most of the time 2%
- Irish and English spoken together 9%
- English spoken most of the time 25%
- English spoken all the time 61%



Educational Background

- Irish-medium school outside of Gaeltacht areas 13%
- Irish-medium school within the Gaeltacht 8%
- English-medium school 79%

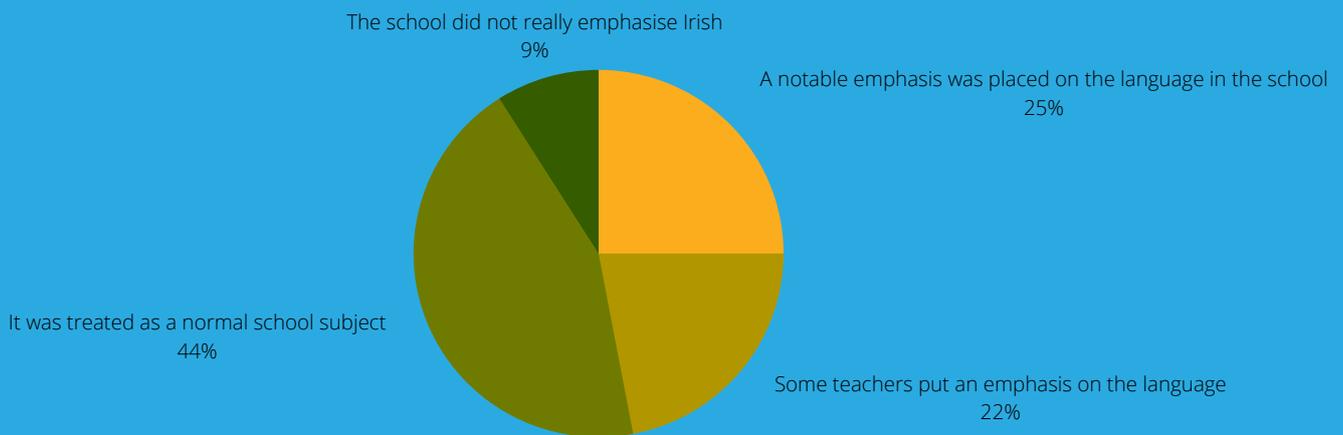


87% of respondents studied Irish at Higher Level for the Junior Certificate, with 79% of respondents studying Irish at Higher Level for the Leaving Certificate.

EMPHASIS ON IRISH IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

IRISH AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT

- On the whole 25% felt a significant emphasis was placed on Irish as a school subject.
- 22% felt that some teachers placed an emphasis on Irish as a school subject.
- 44% said Irish was treated as a regular school subject.
- 9% said that little emphasis was placed on Irish in school.



English-medium schools

Of the respondents who attended an English-medium school (1,152 people), 11% said that a significant emphasis was placed on Irish as a school subject, 25% said that some teachers placed an emphasis on Irish, 54% responded saying it was treated as a regular school subject, and 11% said that no emphasis was placed on Irish in school.

Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

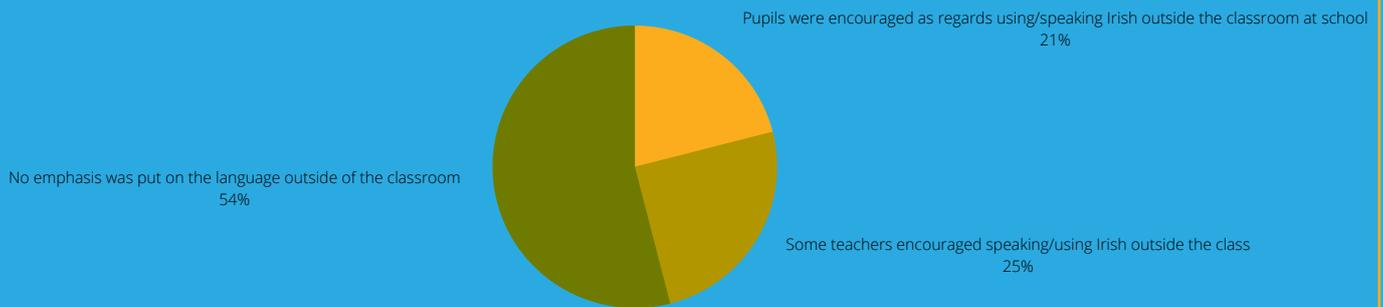
As regards the emphasis placed on Irish as a school subject in Irish-medium schools outside of Gaeltacht areas, 78% felt that a significant emphasis was placed on Irish as a school subject. 13% said that some teachers placed an emphasis on Irish and 9% responded saying it was treated as a regular school subject.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

Of the 120 people who attended Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht, 75% said that a significant emphasis was placed on Irish as a school subject, 14% said that some teachers placed an emphasis on the language, 8% felt it was treated as a regular school subject and 3% said no emphasis was placed on the language in school.

IRISH AS A LIVING LANGUAGE

- Of all of the respondents, 21% said they were encouraged to speak/use Irish outside of the classroom in school.
- 25% said some teachers encouraged students to speak/use Irish outside of the classroom.
- 54% said that no emphasis was placed



English-medium schools

Of the 1,152 students who attended English-medium schools, 5% felt that an emphasis was placed on Irish as a living language outside of the classroom, 28% said that some teachers placed an emphasis on Irish as a living language and 67% responded saying no emphasis was placed on the usage/speaking of the language outside of school.

Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

80% of respondents who attended an Irish-medium school said they were encouraged to use and speak Irish outside of the classroom, 13% said that some teachers placed an emphasis on Irish as a living language, and 7% said that no emphasis was placed on the usage of Irish outside of school.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

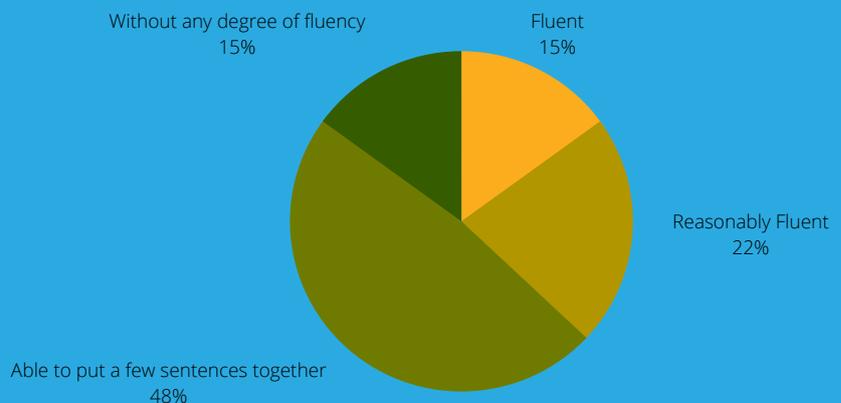
Of the respondents that attended an Irish-medium school in the Gaeltacht, 73% felt they were encouraged to speak Irish outside of school, 22% said that some teachers placed an emphasis on Irish as a living language, and 6% said no emphasis was placed on the usage/speaking of Irish outside of school.

Syllabuses and Proficiency in the Language

This section of the report looks at the standard of the teaching of Irish in both primary and secondary schools, and at how effective the syllabuses are for nurturing fluency in the language. Participants were asked questions regarding the enjoyment they got from the course, as well as their fluency after both primary and secondary school.

Proficiency in Irish after primary school

- Overall 15% said they felt they were fluent in Irish after primary school
- 22% felt they were reasonably fluent
- 48% were able to string some sentences together
- 15% of respondents had no fluency whatsoever



English-medium schools

Of the respondents that attended an English-medium school, 2% felt they were fluent in Irish after primary school, 20% felt they were reasonably fluent, 59% were able to string a couple of sentences together and 19% said they had no fluency whatsoever in the language.

Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

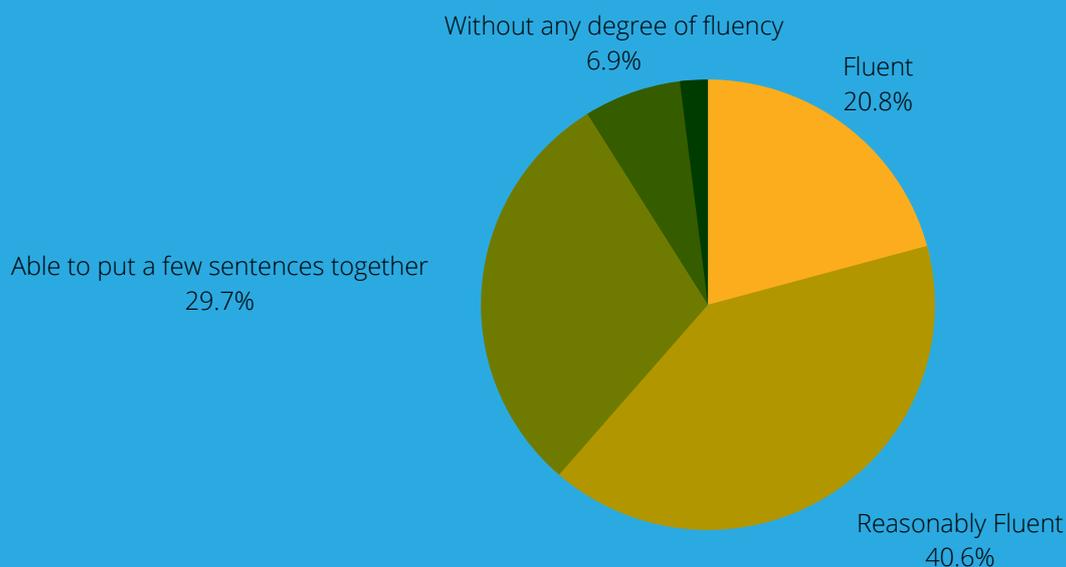
As regards Irish-medium education, 56% of respondents were fluent in Irish when they left primary school and 32% said they were reasonably fluent. Only 11% said they could only string a few sentences together, and 1% said they had no fluency in Irish after primary school.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

As regards those who attended Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht, 76% said they were fluent in Irish leaving primary school and 20% were reasonably fluent. Only 3% said they could only string a couple of sentences together, and 2% said they had no fluency in the language after primary school.

Proficiency in Irish after the Leaving Certificate

- Of all of the respondents, 21% said they were fluent after secondary school.
- 41% believed they were reasonably fluent
- 30% were able to string a couple of sentences together
- 7% had no fluency in the language after the Leaving Certificate
- 2% were yet to do the Leaving Certificate at the time of the survey



English-medium schools

Of the respondents who attended an English-medium school, 8% said they were fluent in Irish after the Leaving Certificate, 45% felt they were somewhat fluent, 37% could string a couple of sentences together, and 8% said they had no fluency in the language. 2% of this group were yet to do the Leaving Certificate.

Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

As regards Irish-medium education, 66% of respondents said they were fluent in Irish upon leaving secondary school, with 27% saying they were reasonably fluent. Only 5% said they could only string a couple of sentences together, and 1% said they had no fluency in Irish after secondary school. 1% of respondents in this group were yet to do the Leaving Certificate.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

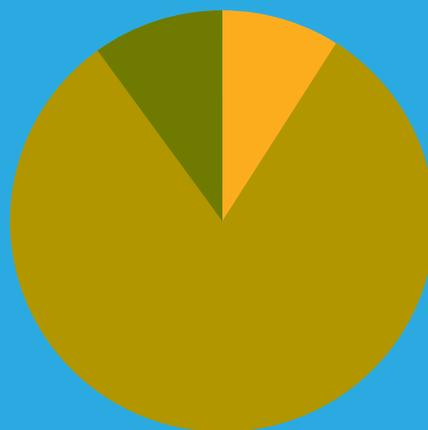
As regards people who attended Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht, 77% said they were fluent in Irish when they left secondary school and 18% were reasonably fluent. Only 5% said they could only string a couple of sentences together. There were no respondents who had no fluency whatsoever after the Leaving Certificate.

The Syllabuses

The participants were asked about the syllabuses for Irish and the areas of the language they focused on primarily.

- 9% of people said the syllabus primarily focused on the speaking of the language.
- 81% believed the greatest emphasis was placed on writing the language as well as literature.
- 11% believed the syllabuses were focused on understanding the language in terms of reading and listening comprehension.

Understanding the language (reading and listening comprehensions)
10%



Writing the language (poetry, essays, stories)
81%

English-medium schools

Of the respondents who attended an English-medium school, 9% said that the syllabus primarily focused on the spoken language, 80% said that the emphasis was placed on writing and literature, and 11% said that the syllabuses were aimed at the proficiency of students to understand the language.

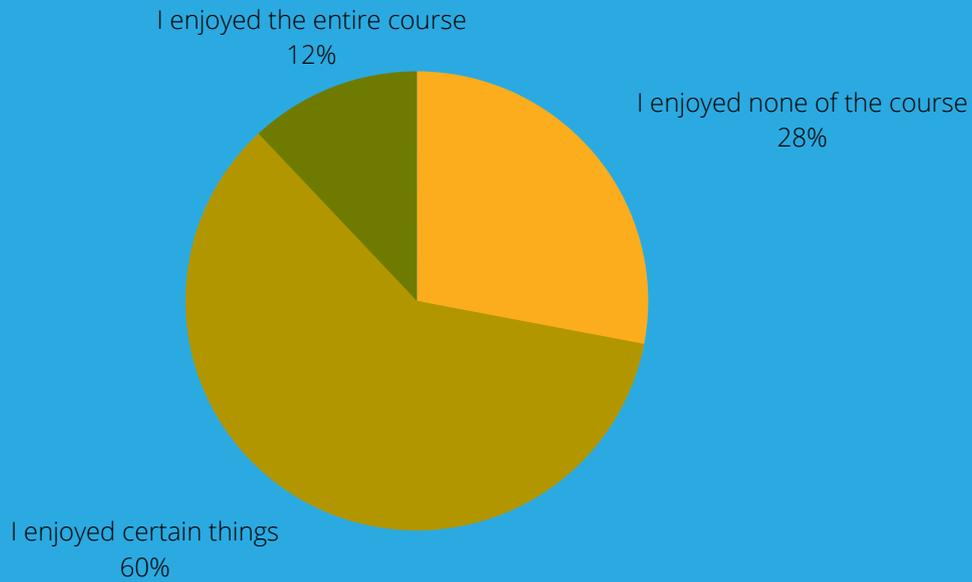
Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

6% of students who attended an Irish-medium schools said that a significant emphasis was placed on speaking the language in the syllabuses, 84% said they focused on the written language, with 10% saying the syllabuses focused on language comprehension.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

Of the respondents from Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht, 7% said the syllabuses focused on the spoken language, 86% felt they focused on the written language and on literature and 6% were of the opinion that an emphasis was placed on language comprehension.

As regards the enjoyment people got from the course, 28% said they got no enjoyment from the Irish course, 60% said they enjoyed certain elements of the course, with 12% saying they got enjoyment from the course in its entirety.



Participants were asked to express opinions regarding the most enjoyable elements of the course at Leaving Certificate level, as well as elements that helped them to achieve a level of proficiency in the language:

'I enjoyed the open conversations we had in Irish. The reading comprehension was middling, without being great. I hated studying the poems and prose, they weren't revived.'

'I enjoyed the elements relating to the oral exam, when we had a discussion or debate in the classroom. I didn't understand the grammatical rules whatsoever, and I would like it if a greater emphasis were placed on the rules, the genitive case and noun genders for example. Maybe we should do a couple of lessons in English to ensure everybody understands what's going on, rather than immersion all of the time.'

'I enjoyed parts of the Leaving Certificate course after achieving a level of proficiency through attending summer colleges. Before that, however, the course was too abstract and difficult for me.'

'I really like the oral exam and learning for that. More emphasis needs to be put on conversation rather than learning poems and writing essays. I also enjoyed the aural exams because its important to be able to listen and understand other dialects.'

'The course was too long; teachers are compelled to cover the content with their students in time for their exams, instead of actually learning the language. The level of fluency expected in the essays was unrealistic given our previous experience with the Irish language, in my opinion.'

As regards the standard of the syllabuses and how they aided language learning, only 7% believed that the syllabuses adequately aided students to learn Irish, and 61% felt that certain elements of the course were helpful. 33% said that the syllabuses didn't help with learning the language whatsoever.

Respondents were asked to give recommendations as to how the Irish syllabuses could be improved, so that they would more effectively create proficient Irish speakers:

'We must place a greater emphasis on the spoken language, practising Irish everyday for example. I believe it is very important because students can use the language in other places, and they'd have a greater interest in the language.'

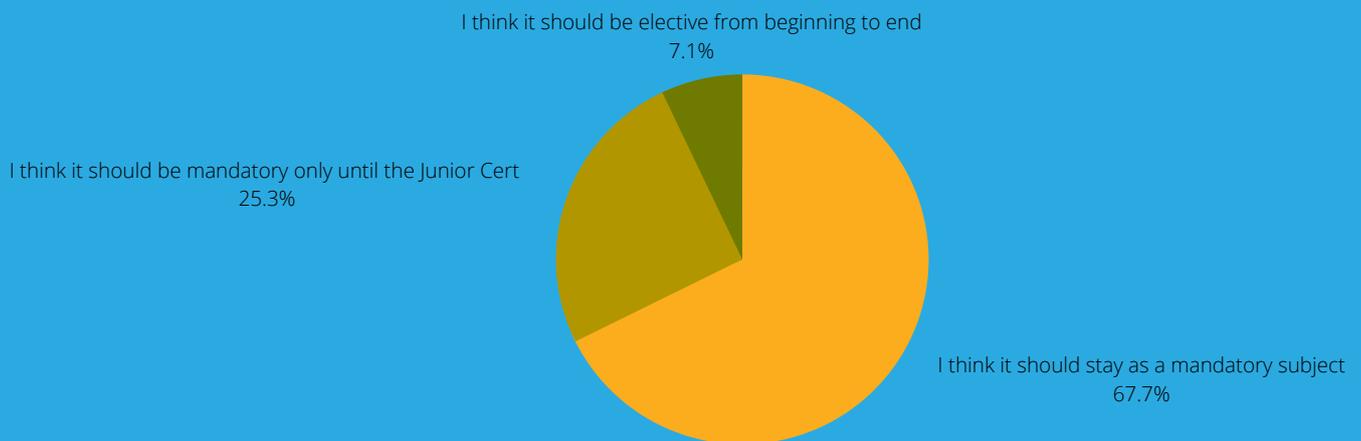
'I'd prefer the oral exam and the spoken element much more. I did the Leaving Certificate in 2012, the year when the course was changed significantly to place a stronger emphasis on speaking the language. I believe this was a step in the right direction.'

'I believe a dual stream system would be better. Irish is the language of this country, and everyone who attends schools here should be able to speak it! That being said, there's no point in teaching literature/poetry to those who have no interest in it. I believe subjects such as art, PE and music should be taught through Irish at primary school level.'

Irish as a Compulsory Subject

The respondents were asked about the status of Irish as a compulsory subject in school:

- 67% believed it should remain compulsory in both primary and secondary school,
- 26% felt it should be optional for the Leaving Certificate and a compulsory subject up until then
- 7% felt Irish should be optional the the whole way through the education system



English-medium schools

Of the respondents who attended English-medium schools, almost two-thirds (63%) believed Irish should be a compulsory subject in school, almost a third (29%) felt it should be compulsory up until Junior Certificate level only and 8% felt it shouldn't be compulsory at any stage.

Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

80% of respondents who attended Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht felt Irish should be compulsory the whole way through the education system. 16% felt it should be optional after the Junior Certificate, and only 4% felt it should be completely optional throughout.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

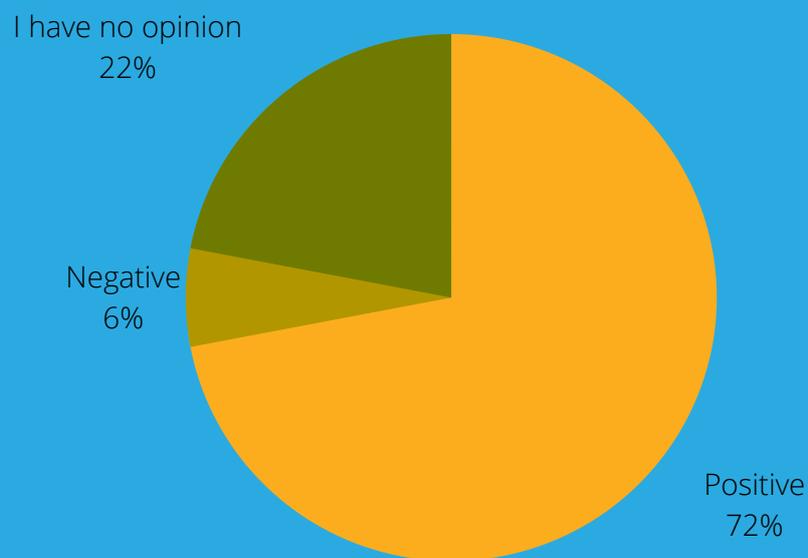
88% of participants who attended Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht believed Irish should be completely compulsory, 8% believed it should be compulsory up until Junior Certificate level and 5% believed it should be completely optional.

Irish-medium schools

In this part of the report the opinions of participants regarding Irish-medium education are assessed, as well as the impact of this type of education on the Irish language community.

General opinion regarding Irish-medium schools:

72% of participants had a positive opinion of Irish-medium schools, 6% had a negative opinion and 22% of participants had no opinion regarding Irish-medium schools.



English-medium schools

Of the people who attended English-medium schools, 67% had a positive opinion regarding Irish-medium schools, 7% had a negative opinion, with 7% having no opinion whatsoever.

Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

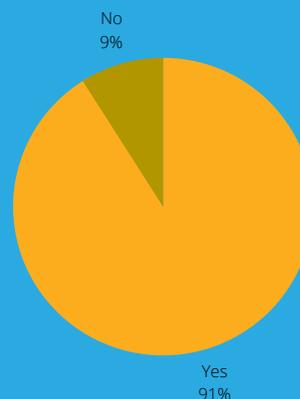
Of the people who attended Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht, 94% had a positive experience, 1% had a negative experience and 5% had no opinion on the matter.

Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht

90% of respondents that attended schools in the Gaeltacht had a positive opinion regarding Irish-medium schools. Only 5% of this group had a negative opinion and 6% had no opinion regarding Irish-medium education.

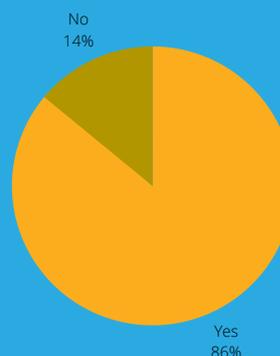
Impact on the Irish language community

The participants were asked a question regarding their opinions of the impact the Irish-medium education system has on the Irish language community, as well as on the language itself.



Creating proficient speakers

The participants were asked about the effectiveness of Irish-medium education in creating proficient Irish speakers. 86% felt that Irish-medium schools were good for creating proficient Irish speakers, with 14% saying they didn't manage to create proficient speakers.

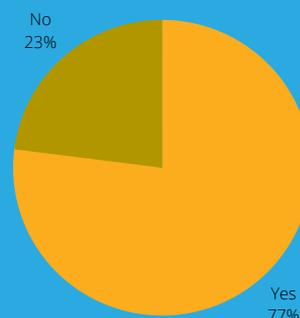


Of the people who attended Irish-medium schools, 93% believed they managed to create proficient speakers, with 7% believing they didn't manage to do this.

Irish-medium schools in the future

When the participants were asked about sending their children to an Irish-medium school, should they have a family, 77% said they would. 23% said they wouldn't do so.

Of the respondents who attended Irish-medium schools themselves, 98% said they would send their children to an Irish-medium school in the future should they have children.



ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from this research that there is an urgent need to review Irish in the education system, particularly regarding the speaking of the language and the communicative proficiency of students.

- It is seen that there is a rise in participants who said they were fluent/reasonably fluent in Irish after secondary school, compared to after primary school. It is believed that the summer colleges have a great impact on this significant increase, as well as the amount of time spent on Irish in school.
- It is clear that many of the respondents are sympathetic to the language, and that most of them are of the opinion that it should be compulsory from primary school until the Leaving Certificate.
- It is seen that respondents who attended Irish-medium schools got greater enjoyment out of Irish as a school subject. It is no surprise that students who had Irish as a spoken language in the classroom got greater enjoyment out of the course than those who attended schools where English was the primary language.

In relation to the results mentioned above, USI has some recommendations regarding Irish in the education system, particularly at Leaving Certificate level. It is recommended:

- That a comprehensive policy is created for Irish in the education system from preschool up until third level, based on the Policy for Gaeltacht Education. It is important that a clear learning pattern is laid out for students, parents and teachers so that students may have a high communicative proficiency in Irish by the time they leave school.
- That a greater emphasis is placed on speaking the language as part of the curriculum, to avoid 'rote learning'.
- That a particular emphasis is placed on Irish as a living language outside of the education system, particularly at primary school level.
- That the demand for Irish-medium education at both primary and secondary level is met