Insight into the experiences, views and perspectives of teachers and students regarding the changes implemented in 2012 to the Oral Examination in Irish for the Leaving Certificate

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Background and Context

Background

There were five parts to the Leaving Certificate Examination in Irish (Ordinary Level and Higher Level) from 1969 to 2011: The Oral Examination, Listening Comprehension, Composition, Literature and Reading Comprehension. At Ordinary Level, the Oral Examination was worth 25% of marks, Listening Comprehension 20%, Composition 20%, Literature 18% and Reading Comprehension 17%. At Higher Level, the Oral Examination was worth 25% of marks, Listening Comprehension 17%, Composition 17%, Literature 30% and Reading Comprehension 12%. At Foundation Level, 25% of marks were for the Oral Examination, 30% for the Listening Comprehension and 45% for the Written Paper.

The allocation of marks was changed in 2012. The Department of Education and Skills Circular 0042/2007 announced major changes to the allocation of marks which would be allocated to the Oral Examination aspect of the Leaving Certificate examination with effect from 2012 (and from 2010 in the Junior Certificate examination). The marks for the Oral Examination at Higher, Ordinary and Foundation Level in the Leaving Certificate examination would be increased from 25% to 40%. The marks for the listening comprehension would be reduced to 10% at both Higher and Ordinary Level and reduced from 30% to 20% at Foundation Level. The marks for the Composition would be reduced from 20% to 17% at Ordinary Level with no change at Higher Level. The marks for Literature would be reduced from 18% to 17% at Ordinary Level in comparison to a reduction from 30% to 17% at Higher Level. There would be no change in the number of marks awarded to the Reading Comprehension at Ordinary Level and they would be raised from 12% to 17% at Higher Level. At Foundation Level, the marks for the written paper would be reduced from 45% to 40%.

Circular 0042/2007 indicated that this new marking scheme would be in place for those who would sit the Leaving Certificate examination from 2012 onwards. An tSeirbhís Tacaíochta Dara Leibhéal don Ghaeilge (the Second Level Support Service for the Irish language) was established in the summer of 2007 to support teachers in implementing the amendments announced in the Circular Letter, "... to promote a significant shift in emphasis towards Irish as a spoken language, where students can communicate and interact in a spontaneous way, and where Irish is spoken every day in schools." This support – full-day seminars, evening workshops, resident courses, school visits, national conferences, newsletters, online supports, etc. – was provided over a six year period, from 2007-2013.

Rationale of the research

When the number of marks was raised for the Oral Examination in the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate to 40% in 2012, this had an impact, not only on the number of marks allocated to other parts of the subject e.g. aural comprehension test, reading comprehension, literature course, etc., but also on the teaching, learning and assessment methodologies used in the classroom to support those changes. These amendments have been implemented over a period of four years. This research has been commissioned to investigate their effect in the context of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination in Irish1 specifically.

Aim and scope of the research

The main question investigated was the experience, opinions and perspectives of teachers and students regarding the amendments to the Oral Examination in Irish at Leaving Certificate level from 2012 onwards. To undertake this, the following three major areas which are closely relevant to the main research question were investigated:

1 This research only focuses on the traditional Leaving Certificate examination. The Leaving Certificate Applied is not discussed.

The **spoken language acquisition/learning process**, i.e. the 'route to the Oral Examination'. It was recognised that the significant increase in marks in the Oral Examination would have strong implications for the preparation for the examination and, consequently, the learning and teaching process of learners and teachers alike was observed. In this context, the motivation, confidence and participation of students in the learning process were explored. Additionally, the impact of the amendments on the teaching, learning and assessment strategies used in the classroom was examined.

Attitudes to the Oral Examination **as an assessment tool for the students' oral proficiency.** The relevance, feasibility and appropriateness of the examination as a tool to test the students' speaking ability was also examined, as well as how the examination contributes to proficiency in the spoken language.

The **long-term benefit** of the Oral Examination. Spoken language acquisition (unlike learning for examinations) and the development of key skills were considered. Key skills refers to the skills required to enable a person to be competent, enterprising and creative and to benefit from the many opportunities available in a constantly changing modern society. In the context of this particular research, this includes, *inter alia*, lifelong learning, being able to participate in the professional life through the medium of Irish, able to actively participate in the Irish language community and contribute to it.

As well as that, the following was investigated:

- The impact of the Oral Examination on the choice of examination paper taken by students in the 2016 Leaving Certificate Examination in Irish.
- The impact of the amendments on other aspects of the Irish language Syllabi.
- The impact of the amendments on the number of schools taking the Optional Oral Examination for the Junior Certificate.

School selection

In order to validate this research, it was necessary to choose schools from various educational contexts in the country: schools under the auspices of the Education and Training Boards, voluntary secondary schools, community schools, comprehensive schools and private schools. However, in order to obtain the most complete and comprehensive results for the specific research areas mentioned above, it was necessary to choose schools from various linguistic contexts also: English-medium schools, Irish-medium collages and Gaeltacht schools. As there are L1 and L2 Irish contexts in these various schools, it was necessary to undertake representative sampling in all contexts to answer the research question in its entirety.

Figure 1: Linguistic Contexts

The sampling included twenty schools in total: seven English-medium schools, seven Irish-medium collages and six Gaeltacht schools (Figure 1). It is acknowledged, in light of the number of English-medium schools in the country, that there is not a strictly representative number of schools in the sampling. It should be noted, however, that it is a purposive sampling carried out to achieve the specific aims of the research.

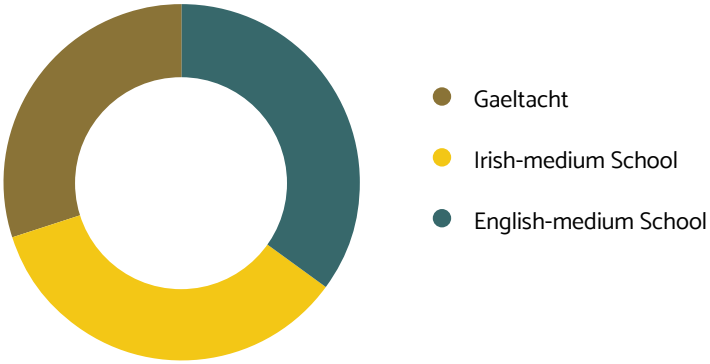


Figure 2: Geographical Range

There was a mixture of school types, sizes and locations in each of these three major areas. As regards the geographical spread of the schools four are located in Dublin, three in the Midlands, three in the north of the country, six in the west, three in the south and one in the border region (Figure 2).

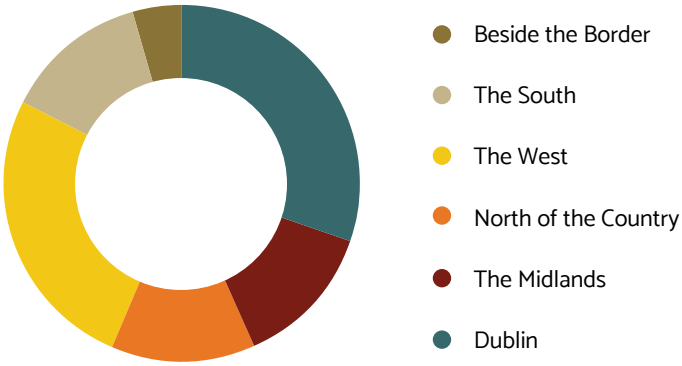
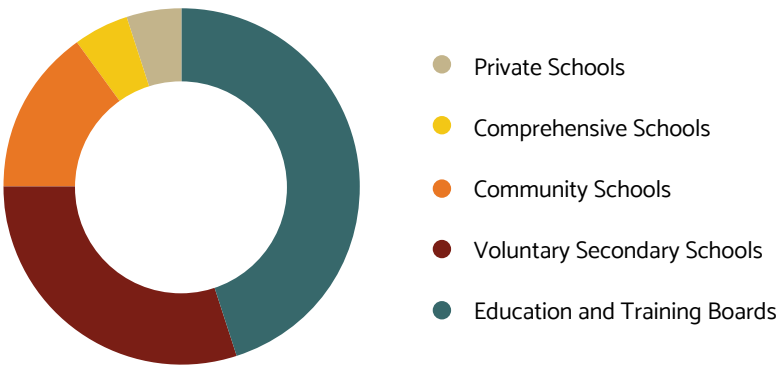


Figure 3: School Types

As for school types, nine schools under the aegis of the Education and Training Boards participated in the research, as did six voluntary secondary schools, three community schools, one comprehensive school and one private school (Figure 3).

Four DEIS schools were among the chosen schools as well as one school with Irish 'Streaming' up to Junior Certificate level.



Methodological approach

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used in this research. Questionnaires were used with the participating teachers and students, teacher focus groups were organised and in the case of students focused sampling was undertaken in the form of 'student voice'. In order to test the feasibility, intelligibility and relevance of the questionnaires, the teacher questionnaire and student questionnaire was piloted in two schools, one L1 and one L2 and the language of the questionnaires was changed after their feedback.

Teacher questionnaire

An online questionnaire *(SurveyMonkey)* was given to the participating teachers – the Irish language teachers of the Leaving Certificate class selected for the research – in the twenty schools at the end of February. These teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences as Teachers of Irish in the teaching and preparation of students for the Oral Examination. The questions were based on the major research areas referred to above and were arranged, primarily, in three areas: the route to the Oral Examination, the Oral Examination and the long-term benefit of the Oral Examination (Appendix 1).

Teachers' focus groups

In order to gather more detailed and clearer information, regional meetings were organised with the above teachers not long after the completion of the questionnaires, the first two weeks in March. Thirteen attended these meetings. Appendix 2 shows the range of issues discussed at the meetings: follow-up questions that built on some of the questions in the questionnaire in order to seek further clarification and information. The focus groups were organised regionally in the interest of efficient management of the work and to recognise dialectal/regional aspects, if any. There was a combination of contexts in each group.

Student questionnaire

The 2016 Oral Examinations were held during the fortnight between the 11th and 22nd April. An online questionnaire (*SurveyMonkey*) was given to the participating students immediately after that, the last week in April. The same areas and types of questions as that of the teacher questionnaire were used to give a comprehensive perspective on various aspects of the Oral Examination experience (Appendix 3). The same questionnaires were given to each school, regardless of linguistic or other contexts. Just like the teacher questionnaire, there was a mixture of multiple-choice questions, questions with a grading scale and questions with dropdown answers. Some questions sought more information through questions such as "Why?" or "Tell us more" so as to obtain further clarification/ information. One hundred and seventy-three students responded to the questionnaire but not all students answered each question: five questions were answered by everyone but other than that there was some variation in the number of respondents.

Student voice

Once again, students had an extra opportunity to add to the responses given by them in the questionnaires. The researcher visited three schools with very different contexts (an urban DEIS school, an Irish-Medium college in the midlands and a Gaeltacht school) to hear the 'student voice', i.e. to provide an opportunity to discuss some of the major issues in the questionnaire more thoroughly (Appendix 4). Thirty three students were involved in this. As was the case with the teacher focus groups, these visits were organised regionally to recognise dialectal/regional aspects, if any.

Timeline

Table 1: Timeline of the research

DATE/PERIOD	RESEARCH FEATURE
September - December 2015	Planning and school selection
January 2016	Piloting of the questionnaires
February 2016	- Contact with the participating schools - Completion of the teacher questionnaires
March – May 2016	Teacher focus groups
11-22 April 2016: Leaving Certificate Oral Examination in Irish	
April – May 2016	- Completion of the student questionnaires - 'Student voice' school visits
Summer 2016	Data analysis
Winter 2016	Drafting and writing of the report
Spring 2017	Publication of the report

Differences between timing of completing teacher questionnaires and completing student questionnaires

Due to the timing of the Oral Examinations and because of their various roles in the preparation process for the Oral Examination, the teacher questionnaires and the student questionnaires were completed at slightly different times. Owing to the workload of teachers of Irish at this time of year and their experiences of the revised Oral Examination from 2012, they completed their questionnaires at the end of February. The students completed their questionnaires immediately after the Oral Examinations so that their experiences were both fresh in their minds and meaningful. Although the same types of questions were asked in both questionnaires, there could be some variations due to this difference. Such variations are identified in the report, where relevant.

Timing differences between the completion of teacher questionnaires and a few focus group meetings

Since the specific period for the focus group meetings did not suit each teacher, it was necessary to convene two meetings a few weeks later. Again, because of this timing difference, there could be some variations between the views and attitudes of the different groups but, again, these variations are identified in the report, as appropriate.

Executive Summary

A summary is given below of the major feedback points received from all research sources, both quantitative and qualitative. This was completed in the context of the major research areas.

The spoken language acquisition process (The Route to the Oral Examination)

Number of marks: motivation, confidence and anxiety

Overall, 87% of teachers reported in the questionnaires that the 40% was a source of encouragement for the students rather than anxiety. 92% of students agreed. In the teacher focus groups, it was more even between encouragement and anxiety. The Picture Sequences – the amount and the students' understanding that they must be memorised – created anxiety, rather than the 40%, especially in the case of English-medium schools. Reference was also made to the variation in the complexity of material in the Sequences. Another source of anxiety, in their opinion, was the Oral Examination's brevity and how close it is to the Oral Examinations in the other modern languages. In the case of the Gaeltacht schools and the Irish-medium colleges in general, it was reported that the 40% gave a strong motivation to the students. Again, in the school visits with the students, the divide between encouragement and anxiety with regard to the schools' linguistic context was more stark: the Oral Examination and the number of marks associated with it was a big source of anxiety for the students from the English-medium school and they did not enjoy the preparation process very much during their course of study. The high number of marks for the Oral Examination did not cause any concern for the students from the Irish-medium college or the Gaeltacht school. As for the ideal number of marks that should be allocated to the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination in Irish, 62% of teachers and 66% of students indicated in the questionnaires that 40% was the correct percentage.

Teaching and learning approaches

81% of teachers reported in the questionnaires that they began nurturing the students' oral skills and long-term preparation for the Oral Examination at the beginning of fifth year. The preparation for the Picture Sequences in particular began early in fifth year in each school. In most schools, ten picture sequences on average were completed in fifth year and ten in sixth year. There was a significant difference between the teachers' response and the students' response: only 37% of students reported that they began long-term preparation for the Oral Examination in school at the beginning of fifth year. This is a question of perspective, the most likely cause being that not every learner recognised that the teacher was fostering speaking skills, integrating various skills or providing communication opportunities across the Irish curriculum.

76% of teachers reported in the questionnaires that Irish was the medium of teaching and communication used in the classroom. Among the other more common strategies used, 71% cited activity-based strategies, 62% said they gave notes to the students about the picture sequences to be memorised while 57% responded that a lot of time was spent practising answers for the Conversation. Other approaches were stated: a Conversation Circle once a week at lunchtime, video clips on www.tuairisc.ie, another teacher giving them an oral examination, pair/group work, mind maps, etc. In the focus groups, they spoke more about how the Picture Sequences dominated the preparation for the Oral Examination. Some also stated that they placed a strong emphasis on integrating work for Paper 1 – the Composition question in particular – and the Oral Examination, i.e. teaching language structures, vocabulary, relevant aspects of grammar, etc., which

prepares the students for both the Composition question and the Oral Examination. No mention was made of the services provided by An tSeirbhís Tacaíochta Dara Leibhéal don Ghaeilge but it is assumed that it influenced the strategies used. Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools were a special case. Unlike the other schools who spent considerable time teaching structures and vocabulary to scaffold an ordinary conversation, the teachers in these schools placed a strong emphasis on the development of students' competence in the use of highly proficient, advanced-level Irish and their grammatical competence.

80% of students said that the way the Irish teacher worked with them during the preparation for the Oral Examination was different to how they worked with them in other areas of the course, e.g. the written paper, strong evidence that the learners identified the specific teaching strategies used for this particular part of the Irish examination. A lot of the students spoke about the emphasis on speaking opportunities and communicative activities. 72% indicated that they enjoyed the time spent in the Irish classroom preparing for the Oral Examination. Many enjoyed speaking the language, but often in the same response they expressed their dissatisfaction with the picture sequences, and the complaint, *"I hate the picture sequences"* made by one student was echoed in the questionnaires and school visits. The school visits revealed differences between the L1 and L2 contexts: the English-medium school used various learning strategies such as conversation practice, but rote learning, especially in terms of the Picture Sequences, was the most commonly used learning method. In the case of the Irish-medium college and the Gaeltacht school, due to the students' speaking ability, this learning method was not as widespread as a learning method. It was used to some extent for the Picture Sequences but in those cases specialised vocabulary and rich expressions were memorised rather than full passages of notes for each picture.

As regards the amount of time that learners spent trying to develop their own speaking skills outside the classroom, the teachers did not agree on this in the questionnaires. 50% thought that the students spent 'some' time at this compared to 45% who thought that they spent little time at it. The students were more positive about their own efforts: more than 42% said that they made a 'great effort' to advance their speaking skills outside the classroom, 37% said that they made a 'moderate' effort, 14.5% said that they made a 'poor' effort and 6% indicated that they did not make any effort at all. Some students pointed to the lack of opportunities they had to use Irish outside of school, which was probably the biggest obstacle they faced as independent learners.

Impact on other parts of the course

There are diverse areas of study in the Leaving Certificate Irish course: aural comprehension, reading comprehension, composition, literature, Oral Examination, etc. 47% of teachers reported in the questionnaires that they spend the most time on preparing for the Oral Examination (six English-medium schools, one Irish-Medium college and two Gaeltacht schools), 25% said they spend the most time on teaching literature, 15% spend the most time on composition, and 10% spend the most time on grammar/Irish accuracy. By and large, there was not a very significant difference between those who thought that the 40% created a lack of time for teaching other parts of the Irish course (52%) and those who did not think it caused time challenges (48%). This question sparked a very lively discussion in the focus groups. Although up to 40% was allocated for the Oral Examination, most of the teachers in the English-medium schools in particular felt that lowering the marks in other areas of the course did not decrease the amount of work still involved with them. Teachers in Irish-medium collages and in Gaeltacht schools were left dissatisfied with the lack of challenge in the literature course and not the lowering of marks in other parts of the course outside of the Oral Examination. Every teacher was very dissatisfied with the literature course: the teachers in English-medium schools with the course content and the teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools with the content, lack of challenge and its brevity.

The students' perspectives were interesting in this context. 24% indicated in the questionnaires that the most amount of time in the Irish classroom was spent on literature (teachers 25%). 20% thought that it was spent on Composition (teachers 15%). There was a significant

difference, however, between the students' feedback and the teachers' feedback as regards the time spent preparing for the Oral Examination: 47% of teachers said they spend the most amount of time on this in comparison with 17% of students. As already mentioned, this is a question of perspective, the most likely cause was that the learners did not identify all of the teachers' efforts to promote speaking skills throughout the course in preparation for the Oral Examination. 28.4% of students thought that the Irish course in its entirety presented them with a strong challenge and 57% said that it provided a proper challenge. Significantly, however, 15% of learners stated that it did not challenge them enough.

Impact on the chosen paper level

60% of teachers (43% of students) said in the questionnaires that the 40% encouraged the students to choose the Higher Level paper but 33% of teachers (30% of students) said that it had no impact at all. However, the majority of teachers in the focus groups said the increase in marks is having little impact on the number of students taking a particular paper (Higher Level/Ordinary Level) in the Irish examination. In the Irish-medium colleges and in the Gaeltacht schools in particular, there is little difference in the number of students taking the Higher Level paper in recent years compared to that before 2012: the majority of these students took, and still take, the Higher Level paper. The schools expressed disappointment about the fact that they see no significant change, i.e. an increase in grades in their students' results.

The Oral Examination

Composition of the Oral Examination

The variety of components in the Oral Examination encourages the students in a very positive manner in terms of interest, confidence and enthusiasm, according to both teachers and students. More than 90% of teachers and students think that the Introductory section (Welcome) helps students to settle down. The Poetry Reading is an important part of the Oral Examination, according to 75% of teachers and 79% of students.

Throughout the research, teachers and students from each school context indicated their dissatisfaction with the Picture Sequences. It is surprising therefore that 70% of teachers and 52% of students in the questionnaires thought that the Picture Sequences gave a good opportunity to learners to demonstrate their speaking skills to the Examiner. It is likely that a literal meaning was extracted from the question, but when it came to the seen/unseen aspect of the Pictures, there was a lot of discussion and the participants' dissatisfaction was expressed. Half of the teachers and 38% of students believed that the Sequences should not be seen in advance. The reasons given was that it promotes rote learning – a method which generated huge pressure due to the number involved and which created frustration among native/fluent speakers as it did not illustrate speaking proficiency. The variation in the standard in the Sequences was also criticised but the number of Picture Sequences was number one on the list of complaints. In terms of the specific preparation for the Picture Sequences, 57% of teachers and 56% of students stated that they used a combination of two approaches – language immersion/practice and rote learning.

In terms of the Conversation, almost 81% of teachers and 90% of students said that they thought that the Conversation gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Of those who disagreed, a lack of time and the limited scope of the questions' subject matter in this part of the examination was mentioned. In terms of the general teaching and learning approaches used for the Conversation, 57% of teachers and 42% of students stated that they used a combination of two approaches: language immersion/practice and rote learning. A range of other strategies used in preparation for the Conversation were listed, e.g. conversation circles, websites like teg.ie, tuairisc.ie, etc.

Speaking opportunities

Regarding the length of the Oral Examination, 47% of teachers and 36% of students reported in the questionnaires that the Oral Examination was either "quite short" or "far too short." This view was much stronger in the focus groups and in the school visits.

Only 14% of teachers and 10% of students reported in the questionnaires that it was "quite long." 51% of students thought that it was "just the right length" but only 29% of teachers agreed with this. Overall, a longer Oral Examination would satisfy both teachers and students.

In terms of the Oral Examination presenting a proper challenge, two thirds of all teachers reported in the questionnaires that it did provide learners with a proper challenge. Three Irish-medium colleges and five Gaeltacht schools were among the respondents here. The feedback was not as positive in the focus groups where the following were criticised: the brevity; the motivation for rote learning; the predictability and narrowness of the questions' subject matter in the Conversation. The students revealed similar opinions: the majority – 62% – reported in the questionnaires that the Oral Examination gave them a proper challenge but a majority in the school visits complained about the limited time, the memorisation aspect, the artificiality of the learning and assessment process for the Picture Sequences and the type of questions asked in the Conversation. In the English-medium school there was disappointment that they did not have an opportunity to show more of the material that they had learned for the conversation because of the brevity of the Oral Examination. The students in the Irish-medium college in particular said that it was unfair that the Picture Sequences were available beforehand, allowing speakers in English-medium schools to memorise everything and achieving similar marks to those who were fluent in the language. The biggest grievance of the Gaeltacht school group was the brevity.

Recommendations for improvement and development

The recommendations made by both teachers and students can be summarised as follows:

RECOMMENDATION	QUESTIONNAIRE		FOCUS GROUPS	STUDENT VOICE
	20 TEACHERS	173 STUDENTS	13 TEACHERS	33 STUDENTS
Reduce the number of Picture Sequences	3	32	11	Unanimous recommendation
Omit the Picture Sequences	1	28	--	
Use unseen Picture Sequences	2	12	5 (sample ones available perhaps)	Some students
Increase the number of marks for the Oral Examination	2	9	--	
Include continuous assessment, especially from third year onwards	5	3	--	Small number
Extend the duration of the Oral Examination (a couple of extra minutes)	3	17	10	
A Conversation that allows the students to use natural, everyday Irish	2	34	--	
An additional feature to test oral proficiency in a more 'natural' way	0	5	2	
Omit the Poetry Reading	2	1	2	

Some extra opinions were given in 'Student Voice':

- Assessment by the Irish teacher, perhaps in conjunction with an external examiner
- Instead of the poetry reading, read an unseen prose extract and answer questions on it
- Use unseen poems

An interesting point from the teacher focus groups regarding recommendations for improvement was that no teacher suggested, of their own accord, the sensitive recommendation regarding two separate Oral Examinations for English-medium schools and Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools. Instead, they focused on how the current Oral Examination could be improved (previously mentioned recommendations). When the researcher raised the issue, there was a great discussion among teachers from Irish-medium colleges and Gaeltacht schools regarding a separate Oral Examination for their students. In the end, almost everyone agreed that the current common system should be retained for all linguistic contexts and that it should be up to the examiner to deal with the various kinds of learners appearing before them in a flexible and knowledgeable way. The same assessment criteria would be used for each candidate as this ensures fairness and parity of opportunity according to the teachers.

Long-term benefit of the Oral Examination

Long-term language acquisition

One of the major goals of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination is to foster spoken language competence: language acquisition and speaking ability rather than learning for examinations only. According to most of the respondents to the questionnaires, the Oral Examination in Irish and the preparatory process for the Oral Examination assists students in acquiring spoken Irish in the long term. In the case of the teachers, every Gaeltacht school and Irish-Medium college agreed with this. However, the answers given in the focus groups and in the school visits with the students contradicted this feedback. According to most of the teachers in the focus groups, the Oral Examination does not boost the students' long-term oral proficiency. In the English-medium schools especially, teachers indicated that the Oral Examination is not the cause of this but rather the lack of opportunity to use whatever Irish they have in the everyday context in which they live. In the case of Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, they explained that their students were already fluent Irish speakers due to the linguistic context of the school, immersion education fosters great speaking skills and because of that, the Oral Examination experience does not add much to the students' language acquisition.

Further skills development

As for the potential of the Oral Examination to foster other skills and talents, such as working with others, creativity, etc., in learners, skills that will help them in the future, 81% of teachers and 67% of students in the questionnaires agreed that the Oral Examination nurtures these kind of skills. Both teachers and students referred to how the Oral Examination develops confidence in the students in going for an interview: this was viewed as an exercise and experience that would benefit them in the future. Interpersonal and communication skills were also cited.

The impact of the amendments on the number of schools taking the Optional Oral Examination

Among the teachers who participated in the focus group meetings, seven indicated that their schools now have a policy whereby each student in third year takes the Optional Oral Examination in Irish. This did not happen before 2012. This was influenced by the 2012 amendments. The Optional Oral Examination was not taken in six of the thirteen schools – because of Trade Union ban – and due to the sensitivity of the question, it was not discussed. It was clear, however, that the amendments to the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination influenced Irish language classes in the Junior cycle in all schools, including the schools where the Optional Oral Examination for the Junior Certificate was banned. Emphasis is placed on communicative activities in the classroom and on informal assessment of the students' speaking skills. In some schools, all students are given an Oral Examination in the Irish examinations in the summer and in a few cases, during Christmas examinations.

Quantitative focus – teacher survey

The route to the Oral Examination

KEY POINTS

Overall, 87% of teachers reported that the 40% encouraged the students. 62% recommended making no changes to the number of marks: they believe that 40% is satisfactory. More schools recommended increasing it to 50% rather than decreasing it, especially English-medium schools.

Number of marks and motivation

87% of teachers said they felt that the high number of marks allocated to the Oral Examination (40%) encouraged the students. Only 9.5% thought that it created anxiety among the students and only 4.8% were of the opinion that the number of marks made no difference. Every Irish-medium college and five of the six Gaeltacht schools indicated that the 40% encouraged their students.

As for the ideal number of marks that should be allocated to the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination in Irish, 62% of teachers indicated that 40% was the correct percentage, 29% recommended increasing it to 50%, with 9.5% saying that 40% was excessive. Of the schools that proposed to raise it to 50%, three of the schools were among the seven English-medium schools. One teacher explained, *"There is too much emphasis2 on literature, especially at ordinary level. Literature should be an extra optional subject in the Leaving Cert and more time should be spent speaking the language and using the language in the right context."*

Teaching and learning approaches

KEY POINTS

The preparation process/promoting of speaking skills began at the start of fifth year in most schools.

76% of teachers replied that Irish was the medium of teaching and communication used in the classroom. In terms of teaching strategies, more than 70% cited that they used activity-based strategies (pair/group work etc.), over 60% said they gave notes to the students to learn for the picture sequences, and another significant percentage, 57%, responded that they spent a lot of time preparing and practising answers for the Conversation.

50% of teachers thought that students spent 'some' time developing their speaking skills outside the classroom compared to 45% who thought that they spent little time at it.

81% of teachers reported that they began promoting the students' oral skills and long-term preparation for the Oral Examination at the beginning of fifth year; 19% began sometime during fifth year. Nobody waited until sixth year. Although these percentages were spread evenly over the various linguistic contexts, a slightly higher percentage of English-medium schools began the preparatory process at the beginning of fifth year in comparison to other school types.

Regarding the teachers' planning approaches, 58% said that Irish was used as a medium of communication and teaching in the classroom and that this was the principal method of fostering the students' speaking skills. There was an intensive period of preparation for the Oral Examination closer to the examination. Three Irish-medium collages and one Gaeltacht school did not select this but it is assumed that Irish is the language used for teaching and communication in those schools and that they wanted to focus on the other approaches they use. *"Only Irish is allowed as the medium of communication and teaching/learning in the Irish classroom,"*[2] one teacher from an Irish-medium college

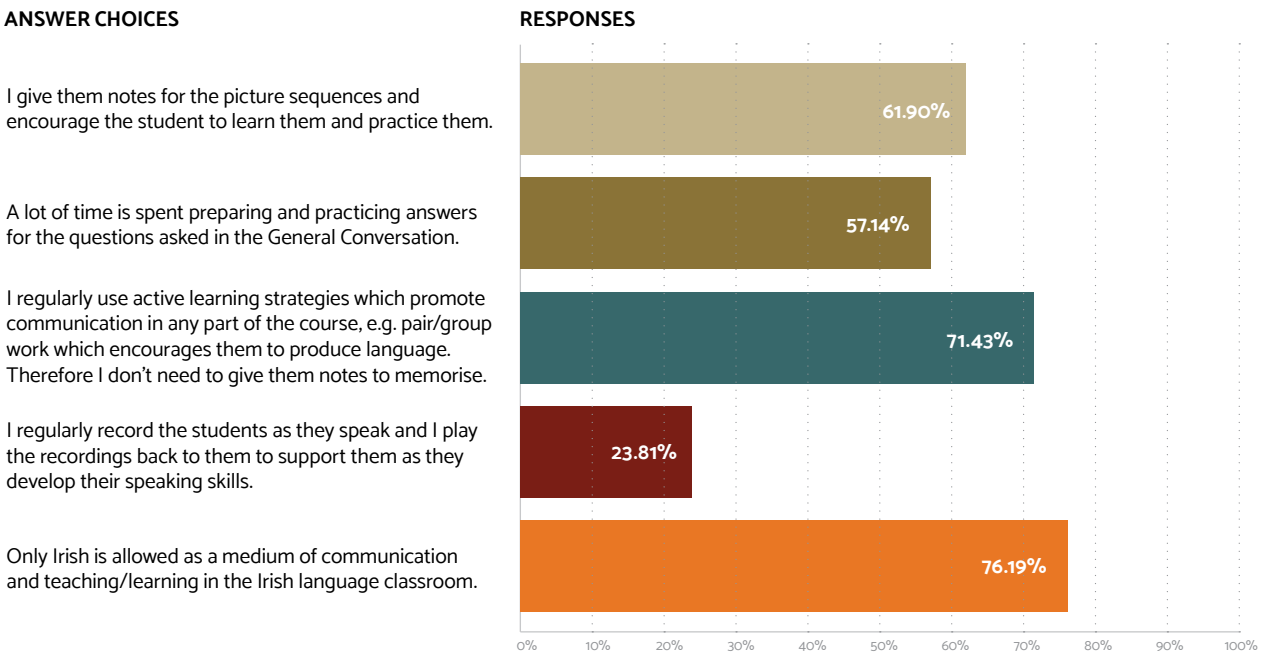
2 The quotations in this report were taken word for word from recordings of teacher and student feedback as part of the research, or are translations of those recordings. Therefore, the quotations in the report have not be edited/corrected.

said. 31.6% of all teachers said they tried to develop the students' speaking skills as part of each class by using activity-based learning strategies as often as possible and then having an intensive period of preparation for the Oral Examination closer to the examination. Only 10.5% reported that they had one particular class per week in sixth year for oral work with an intensive period of preparation closer to the Oral Examination.

The percentage who said that Irish was used as a medium of communication and teaching in the classroom increased to 76.2% in the question which asked teachers to identify the most frequently used strategies used to promote the students' speaking skills. Among the other more common strategies used, 71.4% cited activity-based strategies, 62% said they gave notes to the students for the picture sequences to be memorised, 57% responded that a lot of time was spent preparing and practising answers for the Conversation and 24% indicated that they recorded the students fairly regularly as part of the preparation process. The following strategies were also used:

- A Conversation Circle once a week at lunchtime
- Video clips on www.tuairisc.ie
- Another teacher from the school giving them an oral examination – practising with another teacher
- *Speed-dating*
- Pair/group work
- Mind maps

Figure 4: The teaching strategies most used by teachers to foster students' speaking skills



As regards the amount of time that teachers thought learners spent trying to develop their own speaking skills outside the classroom, the teachers were not in agreement about it. 50% thought that the students spent 'some' time at this compared to 45% who thought that they spent little time at it. Every Irish-Medium college was in the 'some time' category. The majority of the Gaeltacht schools were in the 'little time' category. As one teacher said, *"The children here speak Irish naturally. It does not occur to them that they need to improve their speaking ability."* The majority of English-medium schools were in the 'little time' category.

Impact on other parts of the course

KEY POINTS

50% of teachers spend the most time (over the two years of the course) on the preparation for the Oral Examination, especially the English-medium schools. 25% spend the most time on teaching literature.

There was not a very significant difference between the teachers who thought that the 40% created a lack of time for teaching other parts of the Irish course (52%) and the amount who did not think it caused time challenges (48%).

81% of teachers agreed that changes were necessary in other parts of the course due to the increase of marks in the Oral Examination. Six of the seven English-medium schools agreed; only two Irish-medium collages and three Gaeltacht schools agreed.

40% of the total marks for the Leaving Certificate Irish examination are for the Oral Examination. However, there are other fields of study in the Irish course: aural comprehension, reading comprehension, composition, literature, etc., areas which require their own time. 47% of teachers reported that they spend the most time on preparing for the Oral Examination (six English-medium schools, one Irish-Medium college and two Gaeltacht schools), 25% said they spend the most time on teaching literature (one English-medium school, two Irish-Medium colleges and two Gaeltacht schools), 15% spend the most time on composition, and 10% spend the most time on grammar/Irish accuracy. (Figure. 5 see next page)

By and large, therefore, there was not a very significant difference between the teachers who thought that the 40% created a lack of time for teaching other parts of the Irish course (52%) and the amount who did not think it caused time challenges (48%). Of the schools that replied that it did not create time challenges, four were Irish-medium collages, four were Gaeltacht schools and two were English-medium schools. It is clear that the greatest challenges were in the English-medium schools.

81% of teachers agreed that changes were necessary in other parts of the course due to the increase of marks for the Oral Examination – 57% agreed and 24% strongly agreed. Six of the seven English-medium schools agreed; only two Irish-medium collages and three Gaeltacht schools agreed.

Impact on the chosen paper level

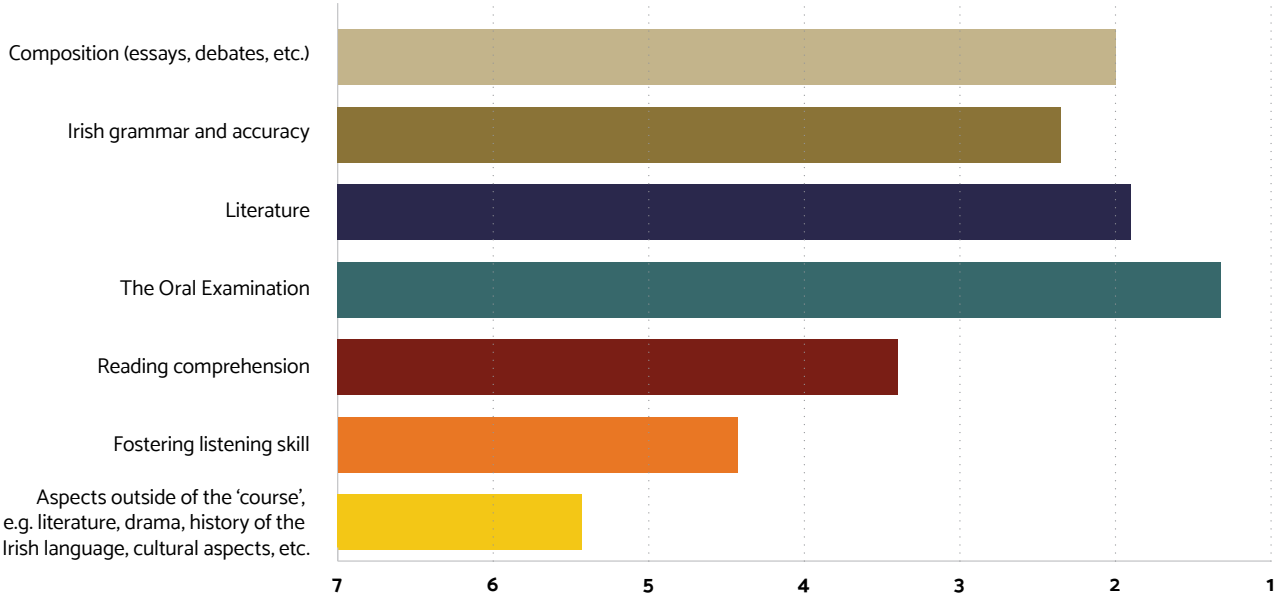
60% of teachers said that the 40% encouraged the students to choose the Higher Level paper but 30% said that it had no impact at all.

60% of teachers indicated that the number of marks associated with the Oral Examination (40%) encouraged the students to choose the Higher Level paper (somewhat higher in the Irish-medium collages and somewhat less in the Gaeltacht schools) but 30% said that it had no impact at all. Two teachers indicated that they spoke with the students about the number of marks available for the Oral Examination and that they encouraged them to consider taking Higher Level. A teacher from one English-medium school said it was difficult for their students to take the Higher Level paper *"because they don't get the chance to go to the Gaeltacht and practise naturally apart from what they do in class."*

Figure 5: Impact on other parts of the course in terms of time

Due to the fact that 40 of the marks are allocated to the Oral Examination, a lot of time is needed to foster the students' speaking skills. However there are many other areas that need to be studied as part of the Irish course. Where is the majority of time spent on those other areas? Give your answer from 1-7, with 1 representing the most time down to 7 representing the least.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	TOTAL	SCORE
Composition (essays, debates, etc.)	15% 3	30% 6	25% 5	10% 2	10% 2	10% 2	0% 0	20	5
Irish grammar and accuracy	10% 2	25% 5	20% 4	15% 3	25% 5	5% 1	0% 0	20	4.65
Literature	25% 5	30% 6	15% 3	5% 1	15% 3	5% 1	5% 1	20	5.10
The Oral Examination	47.37% 9	40.53% 2	21.05% 4	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	5.26% 1	0% 0	19	5.68
Reading comprehension	0% 0	5% 1	10% 2	40% 8	35% 7	5% 1	5% 1	20	3.60
Fostering listening skill	0% 0	0% 0	9.52% 2	14.29% 3	4.76% 1	66.67% 14	4.76% 1	21	2.57
Aspects outside of the 'course', e.g. literature, drama, history of the Irish language, cultural aspects, etc.	4.76% 1	0% 0	0% 0	4.76% 1	4.76% 1	4.76% 1	80.95% 17	21	1.57



The Oral Examination

Composition of the Oral Examination

KEY POINTS

The variety of components in the Oral Examination encourages the students in a very positive manner in terms of interest, self-confidence and enthusiasm. Almost all of the teachers believe that the Introductory part or Welcome helps students to settle down. The Poetry Reading is an important part of the Oral Examination, according to 75%. 70% of teachers said that they thought that the Picture Sequence gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Half of all teachers believed that the Picture Sequences should not be seen by the students in advance. Some teachers took the opportunity in this question to convey their general dissatisfaction with the Picture Sequences, especially with respect to the number of Sequences (20), saying that it was excessive. In terms of the specific preparation for the Picture Sequences, 57% stated that they used a combination of two approaches: language immersion/practice and rote learning. Almost 81% of teachers said that they thought that the Conversation gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Of those who disagreed, a lack of time and the limited scope of the questions' subject matter in this part of the examination were mentioned. In terms of the general teaching approaches for the Conversation, 57% stated that they used a combination of two approaches: language immersion/practice and rote learning. A range of other strategies used in preparation for the Conversation were given, e.g. conversation circles, websites like teg.ie.

The Leaving Certificate Oral Examination has a variety of features: Welcome, Poetry Reading, Picture Sequence and General Conversation. 76% of teachers indicated that this variety spurred an interest among the students to study and prepare for the Oral Examination, 86% indicated that the variety promoted more self-confidence in terms of achievement and 86% said it fostered more enthusiasm in the students in improving their speaking skills in general, not just for examinations.

In relation to the specific parts of the Oral Examination, more than 95% of teachers agreed that the Welcome helps students to settle down. 23% said that no marks should be awarded to it but only 7.7% said that there was no need for it. In the case of poetry reading, 75% of teachers agreed that it is a good way to test reading skills, phonetic aspects and understanding of the language. On that basis, they believed that this was an important part of the Oral Examination. Five Gaeltacht schools and three Irish-medium colleges were included here.

In terms of the Picture Sequence, 70% of teachers indicated – 20% strongly so – that they thought that it gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Six of the seven Gaeltacht schools, four of the six Irish-medium collages and four of the seven English-medium schools gave this positive response.

Half of all teachers believed that the Picture Sequences should not be seen by students in advance – three Gaeltacht schools, four Irish-medium collages and three English-medium schools. One Gaeltacht school teacher said, *"I don't think that students undertaking Higher Level should see the Picture Sequence in advance. I recommend practising sample sequences in class to get used to the layout and so on but that different sequences be used on the day of the examination."* Another teacher from an Irish-medium college stated, *"A better challenge for them. Some students use rote learning for the sequences."*

Some teachers took the opportunity in this question to convey their general dissatisfaction with the Picture Sequences.

> *"There is no fairness or sense involved with them. I agree with them being part of the examination but I am fully certain that there are too many of them. This is my view and the view of all the teachers in my school. They take a lot of time to prepare and I don't understand why they are changed every year – it doesn't make a difference to the students but it puts more stress on the teachers."*

> *"I think they are a waste of time. They are of no benefit!!"*

"Students may be learning bits off by heart for the sequences and this is not boosting their spoken language ability."

(Teachers, English-medium schools)

In terms of the specific preparation for the Picture Sequences, unlike the preparation for other parts of the Oral Examination, a third of all teachers said that language immersion and practice was the methodology they used the most, almost 10% said that students memorised notes for the Picture Sequences and 57% said that they used a combination of both approaches.

In terms of the Conversation, almost 81% of teachers indicated, 52% strongly so, that they thought that the General Conversation gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. The results were equal across the various school contexts. Of those who disagreed, and even among a few who agreed, there were complaints about a lack of time and the limited scope of the questions' subject matter.

"The time is too short. By the time the questions have been answered about the student, home, school and recreation the time is almost up, and as was mentioned earlier, the same questions are used in the Junior Certificate. I recommend challenging the students undertaking Higher Level to be able to talk about current affairs, news stories, teenage life, current affairs ..." (Gaeltacht school)

"They must have an opportunity to talk about a wide range of topics; it is an opportunity to test the quality of the students' verbal and comprehension standard."

According to a teacher from another Irish-medium college:

"It does indeed give the students an opportunity to show their speaking skills but I feel that the picture sequence takes too much time away from the conversation itself. Only nine minutes or so are left for the conversation. In my opinion this is not enough time for this aspect of the examination." (Irish-medium college)

In terms of the specific preparation for the Conversation, 43% of all teachers said that language immersion and practice was the methodology they used the most, without any use of notes to memorise, while 57% stated that they used a combination of two approaches: language immersion/practice and rote learning.

Teachers were given the opportunity to mention any other strategies they use as preparation for the Conversation. The teachers provided the following recommendations:

- *"TEG.ie and Ceacht.ie"*
- *"A trip to the Gaeltacht for a week. Doing various initiatives in Irish. Doing a module in Irish music and culture."*
- *"Practising in pairs in the classroom, I record students (former students now) and play them back to the students. Our school performs oral examinations each year as part of the in-house examinations and the students have this experience from first year."*
- *"Talking and chatting every day, seizing every opportunity"*
- *"Making the conversation realistic and basic for the weakest students"*
- *"Practice, practice, practice! Pair work, recording them, practising with other Irish teachers, conversation circle."*
- *"Listening to the radio, allowing them to research current affairs. Our students are 19 when preparing for the examinations, they must be able to offer opinions, discussion and debate."*
- *"I think it is very useful to listen to other students doing their oral examination. Cuireadh chun Cainte is a great resource too."*
- *"Conversation Circle at lunchtime on Friday so that the pupils are comfortable."*

Speaking opportunities

KEY POINTS

47% reported that the Oral Examination was either "quite short" or "far too short"; 29% said it was "just the right length."

81% of teachers said that they thought that the Oral Examination as a whole gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner.

In terms of the Oral Examination presenting a proper challenge, two thirds of all teachers reported that it did provide learners with a proper challenge. Three Irish-medium colleges and five Gaeltacht schools were represented. The additional information provided by teachers gave great insight into their reasons.

Regarding the length of the Oral Examination, almost 29% of teachers reported that it was "just the right length" compared to one third who said that it was "quite short," with over 14% saying it was "far too short." Nearly 24% felt it was "quite long."

81% of teachers indicated, 33% strongly so, that they thought that the Oral Examination as a whole gave a good opportunity to the students to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Only one Irish-Medium college and two Gaeltacht schools disagreed.

In terms of the Oral Examination presenting a proper challenge, two thirds of all teachers reported – 9.5% strongly so – that it **did** provide learners with a proper challenge (See Figure 6). Three Irish-medium colleges and five Gaeltacht schools were represented. Therefore it was primarily Irish-medium collages who disagreed with this statement compared with other school contexts. The additional information provided by the majority of teachers gave great insight into their reasons. In relation to the two thirds who said that the Oral Examination gave a proper opportunity to the students, teachers from various contexts mentioned

"It encourages the students to spend time preparing and practising their Irish." (Irish-medium college)

"I agree that there should be a skilled examiner there to speak to native speakers." (Gaeltacht school)

"I think the questions are wide-ranging and the students have enough time to show their vocabulary and grammatical accuracy clearly." (English-medium school)

A teacher with experience of working in various contexts gave a fascinating insight into their particular experience.

"I am between two minds. From my experience in English schools it is a challenge but it is not too challenging for Gaeltacht schools."

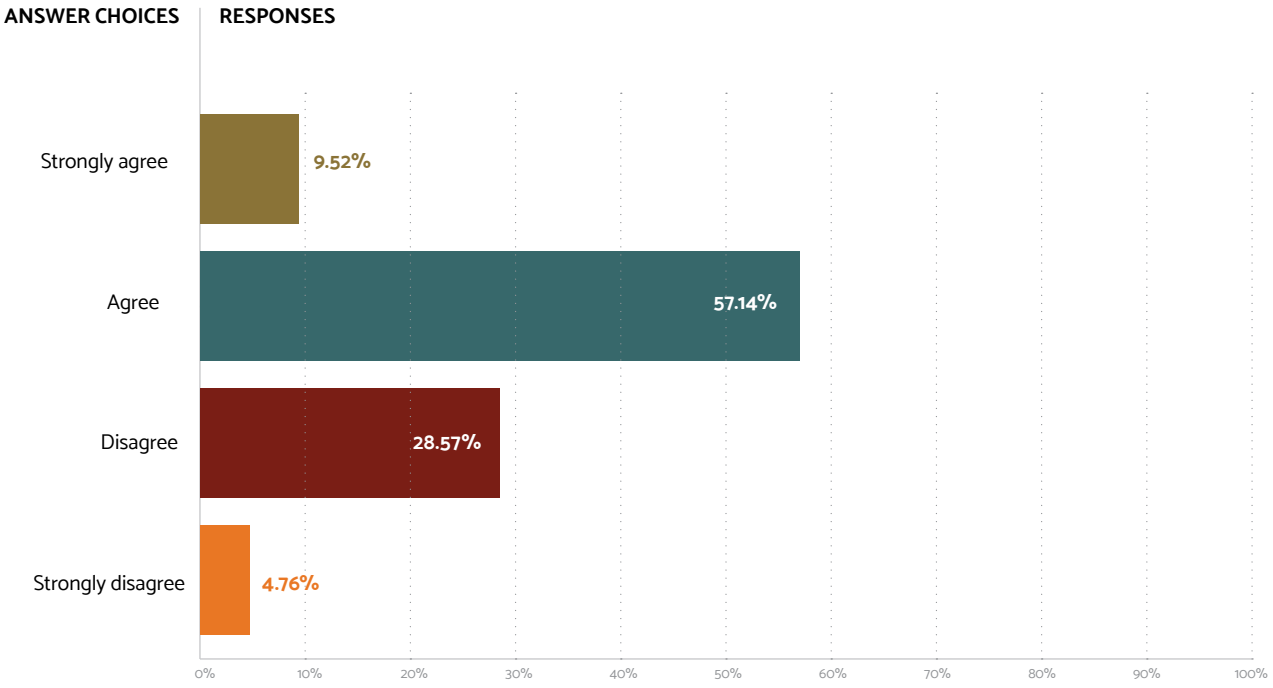
In the case of those teachers who felt that the Oral Examination does not offer a proper challenge:

"Students must be able to speak about many topics, it is not enough to have things memorised because there is a strong emphasis on natural conversation. I feel that there are too many pictures in the picture sequence and they are too challenging for some students." (Irish-medium college)

"The same questions are asked of students in the oral examination at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level more or less. The students realise this and some of them feel that they are speaking about family, school and recreation since first year! Also, for the fluent Irish speaker there isn't much time (8 minutes) to impress the examiner." (Gaeltacht school)

"There isn't enough time allocated for the conversation." (English-medium school)

Figure 6: 'The Oral Examination is appropriately challenging for the Irish Leaving Certificate student'?



Recommendations for improvement and development

Teachers were asked to offer recommendations to make the Oral Examination even more effective as an assessment tool. Five (three from Gaeltacht schools, one from an Irish-medium college and one from an English-medium school) recommended continuous assessment, especially from third year onwards. Three people (one from every linguistic context) recommended reducing the number of Picture Sequences. Three other people (two from English-medium schools and one from an Irish-medium college) recommended extending the duration of the Oral Examination. As a teacher in an Irish-medium college said,

> *"Spend more time on the conversation itself; put an emphasis on the natural conversation; less picture sequences as they emphasise learning off by heart!"*

Two (one from a Gaeltacht school and one from an Irish-medium college) supported the recommendation that Picture Sequences should not be seen beforehand. The teacher from the Gaeltacht school said:

> *"No opportunity for preparation in advance in respect of the Picture Sequence. Leave the reading of the poem out but instead give them an unseen piece to read. No marks for the welcome."*

Two people (a teacher in a Gaeltacht school and a teacher in an English-medium school) recommended increasing the number of marks for the Oral Examination. The teacher from the Gaeltacht school said, *"Award 50% to the examination."* Two people (a teacher in a Irish-medium college and a teacher in an English-medium school) referred to broader and more varied questions in the Conversation. Only one teacher (a teacher from an Irish-medium college) mentioned that there should be a specific Oral Examination for Higher Level and for Ordinary Level. *"Specific examinations for ordinary and higher level,"* they recommended.

Long-term impact of the Oral Examination

Long-term language acquisition

KEY POINTS

According to more than 90% of teachers, the Oral Examination in Irish and the preparatory process for the Oral Examination assists students to acquire spoken Irish in the long term.

One of the major goals of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination is to foster spoken language competence: language acquisition and speaking ability rather than learning for examinations only.

> *"The intention of the increase in marks for oral assessment is to promote a significant shift in emphasis towards Irish as a spoken language, where students can communicate and interact in a spontaneous way ..." (Circular Letter 0042/07).*

According to more than 90% of teachers, the Oral Examination in Irish and the preparatory process for the Oral Examination assists students to acquire spoken Irish in the long term. Every Gaeltacht school and Irish-Medium college agreed with this.

Further skills development

KEY POINTS

81% of teachers believe that the Oral Examination fosters other skills and talents in students, which will help them in the future.

As for the potential of the Oral Examination to foster other skills and talents, such as working with others, creativity, etc., in learners, skills that will help them in the future, 81% agreed that the Oral Examination nurtures these kind of skills. Many teachers said that the Oral Examination gave the students confidence to apply for an interview.

> *"It also gives them a chance to practise interview skills if any of them are going for an interview in Irish for a particular course."*

> *"The students are practising the skill of communication and are getting good experience in terms of interviews."*

As for the two teachers who disagreed, the following was said:

> *"I don't think that any creativity is associated with it."*

> *"There is a certain amount of rote learning involved with the Picture Sequences and the Conversation. This occurs because the Picture Sequences and the majority of questions in the Conversation are already known."*

Qualitative focus – teacher focus groups

The focus group meetings were organised in order to get more information and more in-depth perspectives as well as give an opportunity to discuss aspects of certain questions in the questionnaire in more detail. Four meetings were organised on a regional basis and thirteen teachers attended in total. Due to the four major areas in the research questions, which included three major areas within the first of these – the route to the Oral Examination, the Oral Examination and the long-term benefit of the Oral Examination – seven questions were designed (See Appendix 2) for the focus groups which mirror those areas. With the exception of questions five and six below, these questions were the same as the questions asked in the school visits to hear the 'student voice':

The route to the Oral Examination

Motivation

40% of the marks for Irish are for the Oral Examination. You were asked in the Questionnaire to discuss the impact this (the 40%) has on the students' feelings and motivation. (The 40% motivates them/ The 40% adds to their anxiety/The 40% has no impact) Would you like to say more about that? [3]

KEY POINTS

The high number of marks allocated for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination creates both motivation and anxiety in students. The Picture Sequences – the amount of pictures and the students' understanding that they must be memorised – causes anxiety, rather than the 40%, especially in the case of English-medium schools. The variation in the complexity of material in the Sequences was also referenced.

Another source of anxiety, regardless of the school context, was the Oral Examination's brevity and its proximity to the Oral Examinations in the other modern languages.

In the case of the Gaeltacht schools and the Irish-medium collages, the 40% gave a strong motivation to the students in general. Frequent reference was made to confidence and preparedness.

Teachers said that the high number of marks allocated for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination fosters both motivation and anxiety in students. This depends on (1) what part of the Oral Examination is being referred to (Picture Sequence vs the Conversation or Poetry Reading) and (2) the linguistic context of the school (an English-medium school vs an Irish-medium school).

A number of teachers from the English-medium schools said that it is not the 40%, *per se*, that fosters the greatest concern in the students but rather the Picture Sequences. There were two reasons for this: the number of Sequences (twenty); and a sense among the students that they all had to be memorised, with plenty of rich expressions, specialised vocabulary and proverbs. The number of Picture Sequences was referenced quite a lot. Almost everyone was in agreement that it was excessive when compared to the number of Sequences used in the Oral Examination in other modern languages (five). It was also mentioned that it depended on which particular Sequence the examiner selected for the student. One teacher said, *"It depends on which Picture Sequence is selected, some are more complicated than others."* It was said that the students understood that not all topics in the Sequences posed the same level of challenge or complexity (e.g. 'accident' or 'missing dog' compared to 'Economic Crisis and 'Climate Change') and that many were very concerned, especially those who were not confident in their Irish speaking level, about which Sequence would be chosen for them on the day of the examination. While the Picture Sequences were cited as a source of some concern in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, it was not at the same level of concern as was expressed in the other schools.

There were a few other aspects that generated some anxiety for students in all the schools: the Oral Examination's brevity and its proximity to the Oral Examinations in the other modern languages. Teachers said that students felt that the Oral Examination did not give them a proper opportunity, in terms of time, to adequately express their speaking skills in the

3 Question 5 from the teachers' questionnaire

Conversation section and that they would love a few extra minutes on top of the thirteen minutes (or so) that the Oral Examination lasts. Five teachers spoke about the proximity of the Oral Examination to the other Oral Examinations, how the students get mixed up with all the languages and how it generates anxiety in them.

In the case of the Gaeltacht schools and the Irish-medium collages, the 40% gave a strong motivation to the students in general, according to their teachers.

> *"It's amazing (the 40%). They have Irish naturally and they are well able to have a fluent conversation with the examiner." (Teacher, Irish-medium college)*

> *"Most of them have a good foundation in Irish and the 40% encourages them,"*

said another teacher from a Gaeltacht school and while there were only eight native speakers out of twenty-nine in their Irish Leaving Certificate class, it is obvious that the Irish schooling context benefited their speaking skills and their preparation for the Oral Examination.

Frequent reference was made to this confidence and preparedness. One teacher even claimed, *"maybe they are too confident in their ability."* Whether this is the case or not, it was clear that the 40% encouraged these students to show and prove their verbal ability in the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination in Irish.

Planning

You were asked in the questionnaire to discuss your planning for fostering and improving the students' speaking skills for the Oral Examination. (For example, do you use Irish as a medium for communication and teaching/learning in the Irish classroom?/Do you have a specific class each week for oral work?/Do you use activity-based strategies as part of each class to foster speaking proficiency? etc.) Would you like to comment further?[4]

KEY POINTS

The Picture Sequences dominate the preparation for the Oral Examination. Most schools start preparing them at the beginning of fifth year. A few teachers said that they provide notes for the students to memorise but, in light of what the students themselves had to say, there is a strong possibility that this same method is practised by other teachers. In many cases, language scaffolding is provided: the teaching of special speaking structures, specialised vocabulary and 'rich' expressions associated with each picture in a particular Sequence and the students are supported to use these to talk about the picture.

Some teachers also stated that they place a strong emphasis on integrating the work for Paper 1 – the Composition question in particular – and the Oral Examination, i.e. teaching language structures, vocabulary, relevant aspects of grammar, etc., which prepares the learners for both the Composition question (Essay/Story/Debate) and the Oral Examination (the Picture Sequences and the Conversation).

Without exception, each teacher said that they try very hard to foster a classroom context and to use unique approaches in order to nurture spoken language proficiency in the students. There was a very wide variation in these approaches.

Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools were a special case. Unlike the English-medium schools who spent considerable time on the teaching of structures and vocabulary to scaffold an ordinary conversation, the teachers in these schools placed a strong emphasis on the development of students' competence in the use of highly proficient, advanced-level Irish and their grammatical competence. Frequent reference was made to the 'richness of the Irish language'.

No mention was made of the services provided by An tSeirbhís Tacaíochta Dara Leibhéal don Ghaeilge.

Regarding this question, the feedback given by the teachers at the focus group meetings can be examined in three parts:

4 Question 9 from the teachers' questionnaire

Specific preparation for the Picture Sequences

The most frequently raised issue by both teachers and students in any part of this research referred to the Picture Sequences. It was the greatest concern for the teachers, and especially the students. Therefore, in the context of the teachers' *modus operandi*, the preparation for the Picture Sequences begins early in fifth year in each school. In most schools, ten picture sequences on average are prepared in fifth year and ten in sixth year.

Various methodologies and approaches are used with regard to the Picture Sequences. In some instances, the teachers said that they provide the students with complete notes to memorise, because of students' lack of confidence and ability. The teachers said that this is a learning method that the students are experienced with and that they ask for this approach. Given the students' feedback regarding the same question, there is a strong possibility that other teachers used the same method but were reluctant, maybe, to admit it because it would be looked upon unfavourably. In many cases, language scaffolding is provided: the teaching of special speaking structures, specialised vocabulary and 'rich' expressions associated with each picture in a particular Sequence and the students are supported to use these to talk about the picture. As one teacher said, *"I teach them expressions and words in the classroom, we discuss them and they do their own bit at home."*

A couple of teachers use the www.tuairisc.ie website, where there are picture sequences, to provide the scaffolding. Another teacher explained that she uses a collaborative approach: she asks the students what they see in the picture/she gets views from the students, a grid with the headings 'verbs' and 'vocabulary' is placed on the blackboard, the students provide possibilities for the grid with support from the teacher – emphasising the richest versions – and the students write down these language structures. The structures are then practised in a communicative environment in pairs.

Integrating Paper 1 and the Oral Examination

Some teachers also stated that they place strong emphasis on integrating the work for Paper 1 – the Composition question in particular – and the Oral Examination, i.e. teaching language structures, vocabulary, expressions, relevant aspects of grammar, etc., which prepares the learners for both the Composition question (Essay/Story/Debate) and the Oral Examination (the Picture Sequences and the Conversation). Topics and subject matters on the news of the day are taught and discussed, such as 'The Life of the Young Person', 'School', 'The World of Work', 'Political Affairs', etc. which are assessed not only in Question 2, Paper 1 (100 marks out of 160) but also in the Conversation (120 marks out of 240) in the Oral Examination. This language is learned and practised in oral form and in written form and this approach is viewed as both effective and commendable. The statement, *"I try to integrate different aspects of the language"* was a widespread utterance in the feedback in general.

Various communicative activities

Without exception, each teacher said that they try very hard to foster a classroom context and to use unique approaches in order to nurture spoken language proficiency in the students. Wide variation was evident in these approaches. Firstly, it is clear that Irish is used as a medium of communication and teaching in class in all the schools as often as possible. As one teacher remarked, *"Many efforts are being made to promote spoken Irish so that they can hear the structures and the language."* *"Language is learned by speaking,"* said another person. Some teachers acknowledged the challenge of getting the students to use the language; the issue here seems to be a lack of confidence. In two schools, a conversation circle is organised in sixth year to provide the learners with a natural communication and practice environment. These are held at lunchtime; in one case, refreshments are provided to entice the students to attend.

Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools were a special case. Unlike the English-medium schools who spend considerable time on the teaching of structures and vocabulary to scaffold an ordinary conversation, the teachers in these schools place a strong emphasis on the development of students' competence in the use of highly proficient, advanced-level Irish and their

grammatical competence. Frequent reference was made to the 'richness of the Irish language': language functions expressed at a developed level, sophisticated, Irish feel to language structures, native Irish used, etc. As one teacher explained, *"I don't do any special preparation, per se, for the Conversation ... it is not restricted ... we are doing it all the time ..."* That is to say, she tries to promote the learners' language skills, richness of the Irish language and grammatical accuracy in an integrated way: she teaches a topic from the syllabus, the four language skills are nurtured through this teaching, *"I go as far as it can ... I try to stretch them,"* and this is done as preparation for any part of the Leaving Certificate Irish examination, especially for the Oral Examination (the Conversation) and the Composition question.

The Oral Examination

The Oral Examination as an assessment tool

The Oral Examination in Irish is an assessment tool that tests the students' spoken proficiency in the Irish language. I have two questions for you here:

(a) Do you agree with this?

(b) Can you give two recommendations to make the Oral Examination even more effective as a tool? [5]

KEY POINTS

The majority of teachers agreed that the Oral Examination is an assessment tool that tests the students' spoken proficiency in Irish but a similar majority made reference to the Oral Examination's ineffectiveness as an assessment tool because of the brevity and the rote learning that students feel is necessary in order to be prepared.

The strongest recommendation cited by teachers was 'Reduce the number of Picture Sequences'. In terms of a separate Oral Examination for English-medium schools and Irish-medium schools, almost everyone agreed that the current common system should be retained and that the examiners should be able to deal with the various kinds of learners.

Most teachers agreed that the Oral Examination is an assessment tool that tests the students' spoken proficiency in Irish, i.e. in principle, it was recognised as a tool designed to assess oral proficiency. However, there were various opinions on its effectiveness as an assessment tool. Most teachers feel that the time set for the Oral Examination – between thirteen and fifteen minutes – takes away from the Oral Examination's capacity to properly assess the students' overall proficiency. It was felt that this amount of time is a little short. By the time the Welcome, Poetry Reading and Picture Sequence is completed, only five or six minutes – sometimes less – remains for the Conversation and, by the time the customary initial questions (home, the family, school subjects, etc.) in this section are discussed, very little time is left for the student to demonstrate their oral ability. According to them, this also leaves very little time for the examiner to comprehensively assess the learners' ability, including vocabulary range, fluency, communication skills, grammatical accuracy and phonetic accuracy.

5 Question 20 from the teachers' questionnaire

A Gaeltacht school teacher disagreed with this criticism, saying that it is up to the examiner to use their skills as a language tester to effectively assess the candidate. While she agreed that an extra minute or two would help, she said that native speakers speak quickly, that they go through the first parts of the Oral Examination rather quickly and that the examiner does not need to go through the exact same questions in as pedantic, as formulaic a fashion as is the case with weaker candidates. *"The presentation of a proper challenge to the students is dependent on the examiner ... he can continue in accordance with the students' ability ... there is enough time for the Conversation,"* she claimed.

The majority of the teachers in the focus groups were in agreement about the second reason mentioned as a possible Oral Examination inefficiency: memorising the Picture Sequences. Due to the fact that they are available at the start of their course of study and the amount of them, learners feel that the most effective way to do well in the Oral Examination is to memorise mini-notes for each picture. Of course, it is not possible to assess the candidates' spoken language proficiency in this part of the examination if this is the *modus praeparationis* used.

Recommendations to make the Oral Examination even more effective as an assessment tool

'Reduce the number of Picture Sequences' was the strongest recommendation: eleven out of thirteen people recommended this. Ten people in total recommended extending the duration of the Oral Examination: four from Gaeltacht schools, two from Irish-medium colleges and four from English-medium schools. Five people – three from English-medium schools, one person from a Gaeltacht school and one from an Irish-medium college – supported the recommendation that Picture Sequences should not be seen beforehand. Only two people – a teacher in a Gaeltacht school and a teacher in an English-medium school – recommended increasing the number of marks.

An interesting point in the context of recommendations for improvement was that no teacher suggested, of their own accord, the sensitive recommendation regarding two separate Oral Examinations for English-medium schools and Irish-medium schools. They focused on how the current Oral Examination could be improved (recommendations above). When it was raised, there was a great discussion among teachers from Irish-medium colleges and Gaeltacht schools regarding a separate Oral Examination for their students. In the end, almost everyone agreed that the current common system should be retained for all linguistic contexts and that the examiners should be able to deal with the various kinds of learners both skilfully and flexibly. The same assessment criteria would be used for each candidate as this ensures fairness and parity of opportunity, according to the teachers.

Long-term benefit of the Oral Examination

Long-term acquisition

One of the goals of the Oral Examination and the learning/preparation process for the Oral Examination is to enable students to acquire spoken Irish on a long-term basis, i.e. not just for the Leaving Certificate examination. Do you agree with this? What about the fostering of other skills and talents, e.g. general communication skills, creativity, etc.?[6]

KEY POINTS

Teachers believe that the preparation for the Oral Examination and the Oral Examination boosts the students' speaking skills in the short term but not in the long term. The lack of opportunity to use whatever Irish they have in the everyday context in which they live is the cause of this and in the case of Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, they say that immersion education fosters language proficiency in Irish and not the Oral Examination.

The Oral Examination lets the students experience an interview environment.

6 Question 21 and 22 from the teachers' questionnaire

In short, teachers do not believe that the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination adds to the students' long-term oral competence. The Oral Examination is not the cause of this but rather the lack of opportunity to use whatever Irish they have in the everyday context in which they live. Many said that the preparation for the Oral Examination and the Oral Examination boosts the students' speaking skills in the short term and possibly in the medium term. In the words of one teacher:

> *"while the Picture Sequence may be flawed, students are practising structures and so on."*

> *"Development is seen over a period of time, although it is slow," said another teacher.*

However, it appears that the learning is short-term:

> *"Conversely, when you meet them a year or two later, you see their standard of Irish has gotten rusty," explained one teacher.*

> *One teacher reminded the group:*

> *"At the end of the day, it is an examination."*

In the case of Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, the reason they gave that the Oral Examination experience does not add much to the students' long-term oral competence is that their students are fluent in Irish because of the school's linguistic context. Immersion education promotes a high level of speaking skills. Not only that, it promotes a positive attitude towards the language and, as one teacher said, *"they see Irish as an advantage rather than a barrier."*

But, in the Irish-medium colleges and especially in the Gaeltacht schools, the Oral Examination was not viewed as giving the students an extra advantage with respect to students' language acquisition:

> *"There isn't much of an advantage in it" (Gaeltacht school)*

Every teacher agreed that the Oral Examination experience gives students confidence and an opportunity to practice for an interview environment and this experience was viewed as a very important life skill. *"They must talk about themselves,"* explained one teacher and this was viewed as a transferable, useful experience. *"Quiet people must speak ... it develops interpersonal skills,"* explained another teacher. A few teachers mentioned that the preparation for the Picture Sequences fosters creativity in the students; of course, this depends entirely on the teaching and learning strategies used for this aspect of the examination.

Extra questions

A large amount of marks, 40%, goes towards the Oral Examination in Irish. What impact does this have on other aspects of the Irish course/syllabus?[7]

KEY POINTS

In English-medium schools, most teachers said that there is still a lot of work involved to achieve the 60% (other parts of the course outside of the Oral Examination). Recommendation: cut back on the amount of material to be covered, e.g. the literature course. On the other hand, a few teachers said that it gives time to teach grammar/improve grammatical accuracy.

What dissatisfied teachers in Irish-medium collages and in Gaeltacht schools was the lack of challenge in the literature course and not the lowering of marks in other parts of the course outside of the Oral Examination.

Every teacher was very dissatisfied with the literature course: the teachers in English-medium schools with the course content and the teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools with the content, lack of challenge and brevity.

This question sparked a very lively discussion in all the focus groups. There was great diversity in the views explored and, indeed, some of the views were completely contradictory to each other (as will be outlined below), depending on the linguistic context involved.

The majority of this feedback falls under two main areas: time and the literature course, although these were interlinked. Regarding time, teachers in English-medium schools were not of the same opinion as other

7 A question from the teachers' questionnaire

teachers for the most part. According to them, there is still pressure involved in getting the 60% that is on offer in other parts of the course. As their students are second language learners, they say that it takes a lot of time to prepare them for the Composition, the Reading Comprehension, the Aural Comprehension and, especially, the literature course and that this creates serious pressure. Although the number of marks for the Oral Examination was raised to 40% in order to give recognition to the importance of language proficiency, most of these teachers felt that the lowering of marks in other parts of the course did not decrease the amount of work still involved with them. As one teacher said, *"there is too much to do in other areas ... cut back on the amount of work rather than the number of marks."*

However, a few people had a different perspective on the issue. At least three people said that the increase in marks for the Oral Examination and, consequently, the decrease in marks for other areas of the course, allowed them to spend time on grammatical accuracy (specifically) and on aspects covering skills and various parts of the course such as current affairs. As regards the Gaeltacht schools and the Irish-medium colleges, it was indicated that they recognise the opportunity that the 40% for the Oral Examination gives them to focus on aspects of the syllabus like the Composition and the Reading Comprehension. However, they were all, without exception, very dissatisfied with the current literature course, saying that there is a lack of challenge, suitability and substance in it. If there was a challenging, relevant, vigorous literature course, they said that they would be satisfied with the current 40%:60% marks ratio. In summary, what dissatisfied these teachers was the lack of challenge in the literature course and not the lowering of marks in other parts of the course outside of the Oral Examination.

The literature course was a bone of contention for all teachers in every focus group, regardless of the school context. Firstly, the choice of texts was criticised. Due to the type of texts in the prescribed literature course and the type of learner (second language learner), most of the teachers from English-medium schools said that a lot of time was required to teach literature. *"The literature course is very laborious,"* said one teacher. *"There is only sixty marks for poetry, a lot of work for little marks,"* said another teacher. Another teacher pointed to the imbalance of marks regarding the poetry reading in the Oral Examination (35 marks – a high mark, in her opinion) compared to the written poetry questions in Paper 2 (60 marks – a low mark for a lot of work, in her opinion). There were strong feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction expressed in these schools in respect of the literature course content.

Irish-medium schools, particularly the Gaeltacht schools, had further ground for complaint regarding the literature course. In addition to the choice of texts, a lot were annoyed at the lack of challenge and the shortness of the course. Since it is not necessary to read full texts and, correspondingly, since only extracts from these texts are assessed, almost every teacher from these contexts felt that it did not pose enough of a challenge to the students. One teacher explained that the literature was a source of richness of language and cultural awareness and, therefore, that the current course is "too short." The course was roundly criticised: *"the literature course is dreadful,"* said one Gaeltacht teacher. *"It has been dragged down to a very low level ... it hasn't a proper core or structure,"* said another Gaeltacht teacher. Suggestions were put forward: a specialised literature course for the Gaeltacht context (covering e.g. local literature, full texts, literature history, etc.); Paper 2 based solely on literature to meet the needs of learners from this specific context; a greater number of poems and stories.

The teachers were reminded that there was an optional course for literature but they were reluctant to accept this as a solution to the issue. Many challenges were envisaged in relation to the optional course: would the examiner be familiar with each story/poem?; there would too much preparation and work involved in selecting and reading texts in advance; would these students fare as well as the students taking the prescribed course, etc.

In addition to the literature issue, a few Gaeltacht teachers raised the issue of Composition/skill of writing in the context of the impact of the 40% on other aspects of the course. One Gaeltacht teacher felt that

the Picture Sequence was *"taking the place of the Composition"* (written) and that *"the skill of writing was being neglected."* According to him, the skill of writing should be fostered in students who were fluent in the spoken language by reviewing this part of the written paper and giving appropriate marks accordingly. But, for the most part, the literature course was of the greatest concern for Gaeltacht teachers in comparison with any other aspect of the assessment process/ syllabus.

Encouragement to take the Optional Oral Examination

Did the amendments to the Oral Examination that were implemented in recent years have any impact on the Optional Oral Examination for the Junior Certificate in your school, i.e. did they encourage you to take it?

KEY POINTS

Schools were evenly split regarding the uptake of the Optional Oral Examination for the Junior Certificate but it was clear that the amendments to the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination influenced Irish language classes in the Junior cycle in all schools – recognition of the importance of spoken language proficiency and of communicative approaches – including the schools where the Optional Oral Examination was banned.

An optional Oral Examination in Irish is offered at Junior Certificate level. Up to 2012 when the number of marks for the Oral Examination was increased to 40% at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level, only a very small number of schools in the country were doing the Oral Examination at the end of the Junior cycle (16 in 2007, according to statistics from the State Examinations Commission). It was expected that the new amendments would have a positive impact on this low number. This expectation was founded on the advantages that one would envisage for learners developing their competence in the spoken language on an ongoing basis over a sustained period and undertaking a testing process of which they would have prior experience. The increase happened: 155 schools undertook the examination in 2012 and 357 in 2016, a significant increase over a period of nine years.

Of the thirteen people in the focus groups, seven indicated that their schools have a policy now whereby each student in third year takes the Optional Irish Oral exam. This did not happen before 2012 and it was said that the 2012 amendments influenced this. One teacher from an Irish-medium college viewed it as *"preparation for the Leaving Certificate."* Teachers from other Irish-medium colleges said it was ongoing in the school prior to 2012 but that the 2012 amendments reinforced their decision, that it made "sense" to do so. In each of these seven schools, the decision to take the Optional Oral Examination has affected other aspects of Irish teaching and learning in the Junior cycle. For example, in most of the schools, all students are given an Oral Examination in the Irish examinations in the summer and in a few cases, at Christmas time. Emphasis is places on communicative activities in the classroom and on informal assessment of the students' speaking skills.

The Optional Oral Examination was not taken in six of the thirteen schools. This was the case because of a trade union ban. It was not discussed given the sensitivity of the issue, but it was felt in some cases that the teacher would be open to the process and recognised its advantages but were prohibited from taking part in it. Only one person spoke out strongly against the Optional Oral Examination stating *"if the amount of work that has to be done in other areas of the course was reduced, teachers would have time to assess their students."* This was a time issue as opposed to a trade union issue.

Impact on paper level

Do you think that the Oral Examination has any impact on the paper level taken by the students? (For example, the number of marks, its assessment type, etc.)

KEY POINTS

The increase in marks for the Oral Examination is having little impact on the number of students taking a particular paper (Higher Level/Ordinary Level) in the Leaving Certificate Irish examination.

There is no significant increase in the grades obtained by Higher Level students; there is a certain increase in Ordinary Level students' grades.

Overall, the increase in marks to 40% for the Oral Examination is having little impact on the number of students taking a particular paper (Higher Level/ Ordinary Level) in the Leaving Certificate Irish examination, according to their teachers. In the Irish-medium colleges and in the Gaeltacht schools in particular, there is little difference in the number of students taking the Higher Level paper in recent years compared to that before 2012: the majority of these students did, and still do, the Higher Level paper. As one teacher said, *"As soon as they begin fifth year, most of them want to do Higher Level."* Another teacher said that sometimes it depends on how well they do in the Oral Examination, *"people who come out disappointed feel like going back to Ordinary Level."* An interesting feature in the context of examination paper selection was that three teachers referred to the fact that there was no significant change, i.e. no increase in grades in their students' results. They said that they expected higher grades in an Irish-medium or Gaeltacht school/in a school where Irish is L1 for the majority of the students. The teachers expressed disappointment in this regard.

The story is more or less the same in the English-medium schools. These teachers say that the 40% mark does not make a significant difference to the number of students taking a particular paper. They say that an additional small number do the Higher Level paper but that this amount is insignificant. Interestingly, they spoke of how the 40% encourages many Ordinary Level students who are neither confident nor competent in the language towards Irish as a subject and as a language in general. *"They get a higher grade ... they realise this, this encourages them,"* in the words of one teacher.

Quantitative focus: student survey

The route to the Oral Examination

Number of marks and motivation

KEY POINTS

The majority of students stated that the high number of marks (40%) encouraged them.

92% of students said that the high number of marks for the Oral Examination (40%) encouraged them. Despite that, 49% said that it also created anxiety in them. Only 16% were of the opinion that the number of marks made no difference.

66% thought that it was right to allocate 40% to this aspect of the Irish examination, taking into account that there are four elements involved – listening, reading, speaking and writing. As one student from an English-medium school said, *"A language mainly concerns communication through speaking and I feel like that should be where the majority of marks should be allocated." "Because it is a language examination, and to have the language you have to be able to speak it,"* said a Gaeltacht student. There were many who agreed with the 40% but were dissatisfied with the time limit. *"I agree but it is a lot of pressure to put on a person to do 40 percent of their Leaving Cert in just 15 minutes,"* said another student from an English-medium school.

Teaching and learning approaches

KEY POINTS

37% of students reported that they began long-term preparation for the Oral Examination at the beginning of fifth year; a significant reduction from the number of teachers who stated this.

80% said the way the Irish teacher worked with them while preparing for the Oral Examination was different to how they worked with them in other areas of the course, e.g. the written paper, strong evidence that the learners identified the specific teaching strategies used for this particular part of the Irish examination.

Far more students than teachers said that they spent a lot of time outside the classroom trying to develop their speaking skills independently, with 42% saying that they made a 'great effort'.

37% of students reported that long-term preparation for the Oral Examination at school began at the beginning of fifth year; 35.5% began sometime during fifth year. 10.5% said that they commenced at the beginning of sixth year while 17% said that they began three or four months before the Oral Examination. According to 49%, a lot of time was spent in school developing speaking skills while 40% thought that some time was spent on this.

80% of students said the way the Irish teacher worked with them during preparation for the Oral Examination was different to how they worked with them in other areas of the course, e.g. the written paper, strong evidence that the learners identified the specific teaching strategies used for this particular part of the Irish examination. It was primarily students in the Gaeltacht schools who agreed with this. A lot of learners, especially students from L2 contexts, talked of the emphasis on speaking and communicative opportunities.

> *"We hadn't many notes in our preparations. The class spent a lot of time talking instead of writing." (Student, Irish-medium college)*

A student from an English-medium school concurred with this:

> *"She put far more emphasis on speaking the language in class instead of learning loads of notes off by heart."*

While Gaeltacht students mentioned this too, they also stated that it was very easy for them:

> *"The Oral Examination doesn't require as much practice as the writing," said one person.*

> *"The classes were more free in the sense that there was less writing involved which gave us a break. Other sections of the course were quite heavy on memorising also so it was nice to be able to take classes and just speak," said another person.*

72% indicated, 27% strongly so, that they enjoyed the time spent in the Irish classroom preparing for the Oral Examination. Many enjoyed speaking the language as well as the opportunity to use it, but often in the same response, they referred to their dissatisfaction with the picture sequences. *"I love speaking Irish ... I didn't enjoy the Picture Sequences in any shape or form, there were too many of them,"* said a student from an English-medium school. A student from the same context added, *"I enjoyed improving my spoken Irish but wasn't able to have full conversations most of the time due to the focus on the Picture Sequences."* Some students were very blunt about the picture sequences: *"I hate the picture sequences,"* complained a student from an Irish-medium college. This aspect of Irish learning mainly suited Gaeltacht students. As one student said, *"It's easy for me to chat to other people in Irish."* It must be recognised, however, that this leaves 28% who did not enjoy the time spent in the Irish classroom preparing for the Oral Examination. The picture sequences were the main reason for the lack of enjoyment mentioned. *"I didn't enjoy the picture sequences,"* explained one Gaeltacht student.

In relation to the amount of time spent by learners trying to develop their own speaking skills outside the classroom, more than 42% said that they made a '*great*' effort, 37% said that they made a '*moderate*' effort, 14.5% said that they made a '*poor*' effort and 6% indicated that they did not make any effort at all. Of those who tried, frequent reference was made to the efforts made to use Irish with family members and friends: *"I spoke at home with my sister who is very good at Irish,"* said one student. Once again the picture sequences were mentioned a lot: *"I practised a little for the general conversation but there is too many picture sequences to even think of learning them all!!!"* said a student from an English-medium school. *"Discouraged by the picture sequences,"* said another student from the same language context. Some students pointed to the lack of opportunities available to use Irish outside of school. *"I did my very best to improve my Irish outside of the classroom but no one else in my family speaks Irish and there aren't many people in the community who are confident speaking it. It was kind of difficult to improve it,"* said a learner from a school with an Irish-medium stream.

The Irish course in its entirety

KEY POINTS

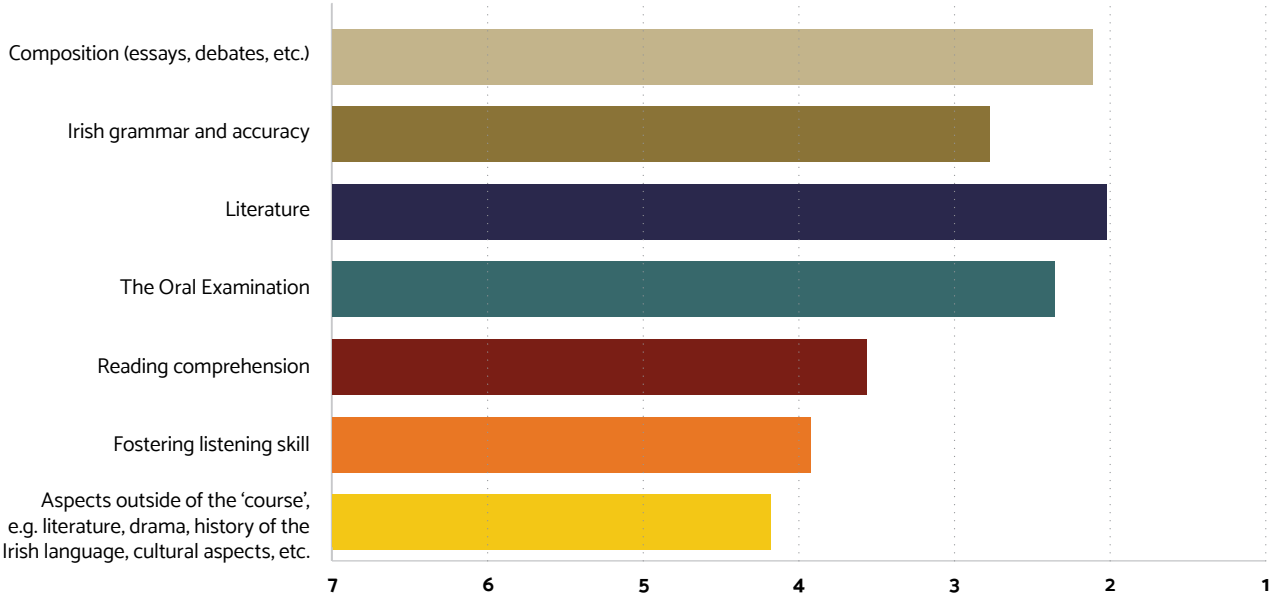
Regarding where the most time was spent, 24% indicated that it was spent on literature, 20% said that it was spent on the Composition, 17% stated that most of the time was spent preparing for the Oral Examination/developing speaking skills.

28.4% of students thought that the Irish course in its entirety presented them with a strong challenge and 57% said that it provided a proper challenge and a significant amount – 15% – said that it was not challenging enough.

As for the learners' perspective on where the time was spent in the Irish classroom, 24% indicated that most of the time was spent on teaching and learning literature, 20% said that it was spent on the Composition, 17% stated that most of the time was spent preparing for the Oral Examination/developing speaking skills, 15% said that it was spent on various aspects, e.g. history of Irish, drama, etc., while 12% said that it was spent on grammar and on the accuracy of the Irish language. (Figure 7 on the following page)

Figure 7: Where was most of the time in the Irish class spent?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	TOTAL	SCORE
Composition (essays, debates, etc.)	19.86% 29	26.03% 38	18.49% 27	8.9% 13	15.07% 22	8.22% 12	3.42% 5	**146**	**4.88**
Irish grammar and accuracy	12.10% 19	17.20% 27	17.20% 27	19.11% 30	14.65% 23	7.64% 12	12.1% 19	**157**	**4.22**
Literature	24.03% 37	20.78% 32	20.78% 32	14.94% 23	7.79% 12	5.84% 9	5.84% 9	**154**	**4.97**
The Oral Examination	17.2% 27	17.2% 27	19.75% 31	22.93% 36	8.28% 13	10.19% 16	4.46% 7	**157**	**4.64**
Reading comprehension	3.95% 6	4.61% 7	13.16% 20	19.08% 29	32.89% 50	20.39% 31	5.92% 9	**152**	**3.43**
Fostering listening skill	3.07% 5	5.52% 9	12.27% 20	14.11% 23	15.95% 26	38.04% 62	11.04% 18	**163**	**3.07**
Aspects outside of the 'course', e.g. literature, drama, history of the Irish language, cultural aspects, etc.	14.81% 24	7.41% 12	3.09% 5	4.94% 8	10.49% 17	8.02% 13	51.23% 83	**162**	**2.82**



28.4% of students thought that the Irish course in its entirety presented them with a strong challenge and 57% said that it provided a proper challenge. An interesting point was the number of learners – 15% – who said that it did not challenge them enough. Having said that, 68% said that they **did not** want a bigger challenge.

Impact on the chosen paper level

43% of students stated that the number of marks associated with the Oral Examination (40%) encouraged them to choose the Higher Level paper but 33% said that it had no impact at all.

43% of students indicated that the number of marks associated with the Oral Examination (40%) encouraged them to choose the Higher Level paper (51% of Gaeltacht schools, 24% of Irish-medium colleges and 42% of English-medium schools) but 33% said that it had no impact at all. As regards what impacted their choices, the students in the Gaeltacht and in Irish-medium colleges referred to their speaking ability: *"I am good at Irish because I go to an Irish-medium college," "because I am fluent in Irish, I hope to get the highest mark possible."* The students from English-medium schools referred to their lack of confidence: *"I chose ordinary level because I do not speak Irish well," "I dropped to ordinary level because I found higher difficult, I find ordinary level much more capable. I really enjoy it now."*[8]

The Oral Examination

Composition of the Oral Examination

KEY POINTS

The variety of components in the Oral Examination encourages the students in a very positive manner in terms of interest, confidence and enthusiasm. 93% believe that the Welcome helps them settle down. The Poetry Reading is an important part of the Oral Examination, according to 79%. Over 52% said that they thought that the Picture Sequence gave them a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Over 38% believed that they should not see the Picture Sequences in advance. In terms of the specific preparation for the Picture Sequences, 56% stated that a combination of two approaches was used: language immersion/practice and rote learning. Over 90% said that they thought that the Conversation gave them a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. In terms of the general teaching approaches for the Conversation, 42% stated that they used a combination of two approaches: language immersion/practice and rote learning.

74% of students indicated that the variety in the components of the Oral Examination spurred an interest in them to study and prepare for the Oral Examination, 80% indicated that the variety promoted more self-confidence in terms of achievement and 68% said it fostered more enthusiasm in them in improving their speaking skills in general, not just for examinations.

In relation to the specific parts of the Oral Examination, 93% of learners agreed that the Welcome helps them settle down. 21% said that no marks should be awarded to it and 17% said that there was no need for it. In the case of poetry reading, 79% of students agreed that it is a good way to test reading skills, phonetic aspects and understanding of the language. On that basis, they believed that this was an important part of the Oral Examination.

Moving on to the Picture Sequence, over 52% of students indicated that they thought that the Picture Sequence gave them a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. 72% of students from Gaeltacht schools were included in this, 38% from Irish-medium colleges and 32% from English-medium schools. Over 38% believed that they should not see the Picture Sequences in advance.

In terms of the specific preparation for the Picture Sequences, 28.5% of all students said that language immersion and practice was the learning strategy they used the most, 15% said that they memorised notes for the Picture Sequences and more than 56% said that they used a combination of both approaches.

Regarding the Conversation, over 90% of students indicated that they thought that the General Conversation gave them a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the Examiner. Almost 90% said that the questions related to their own lives and to the lives of young people. In terms of the specific preparation for the Conversation, 47% of students said that language immersion and practice was the methodology they used the most, 11% said that they memorised answers while 42% stated that they used a combination of both approaches: language immersion/practice and rote learning.

8 See: Appendix 5 for all the answers supplied to this question.

Speaking opportunities

KEY POINTS

36% reported that the Oral Examination was either "quite short" or "far too short"; 51% said it was "just the right length."

89% of students said that they thought that the Oral Examination as a whole gave them a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the Examiner.

In terms of the Oral Examination presenting a proper challenge, 63% reported that it provided them with a proper challenge (63% from Gaeltacht schools, 68% from Irish-medium colleges, 59% from English-medium schools and 65% from the Irish language stream). The additional information provided by students gave great insight into their reasons.

Regarding the length of the Oral Examination, 51% of students reported that it was "just the right length" (51% from Gaeltacht schools, 50% from Irish-medium colleges, 54% from English-medium schools and 50% from the Irish language stream) compared to 23% who said that it was "quite short" with 13% saying it was "far too short" Almost 10% were of the opinion that it was "long enough." 89% of students indicated, 52% strongly so, that they thought that the Oral Examination as a whole gave them a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the Examiner.

In terms of the Oral Examination presenting a proper challenge, 62% reported that **it did provide** them with a proper challenge (63% from Gaeltacht schools, 68% from Irish-medium colleges, 59% from English-medium schools and 65% from the Irish language stream). The additional information provided by some students gave an insight into their reasons. Regarding those who said they were given a proper challenge, statements like the following were made: *"I got nervous but was able to talk a lot so I was happy," "my examiner was very relaxed and such a bad examiner, for the amount of work students put in they should be able to show off more skills they have, he was very very relaxed," "in the Gaeltacht school it was great," "Difficult enough but grand," "I found the picture sequence very challenging as I'm useless at learning off by heart but I think the poetry and general conversation are appropriately challenging."*

Regarding those who said it was too challenging:

"The examiner asked questions I never thought would be asked."

"The amount of tSraith Pictiúr stressed me out way too much and I felt like it was too stressful knowing I wouldn't be able to choose the tSraith Pictiúr I wanted and it was too hard to remember all of the content."

"The examiner was constantly cutting in and asking question after question which made me have to think fast and change topic often which greatly pressurized me."

"I got a hard sraith pic and that immediately set the tone of the conversation."

"Picture sequences."

In the case of those students who felt that the Oral Examination does not offer a proper challenge:

"the examiner was too easy on me."

"would have preferred more time."

"Very easy for Connemara kids."

"I wasn't asked any unusual questions. I was ready for it."

"the examiner didn't really care."

"The picture sequences were difficult because I hadn't looked over them, but everything else was very easy."

"it was too easy."

"It was a normal conversation, it didn't feel like an examination."

Recommendations for improvement and development

Students were asked to make some recommendations to make the Oral Examination even more effective as an assessment tool. One hundred and thirty people responded. There is a full account in Appendix 6 of all the answers given to this question according to school context, but the following is a summary of those recommendations:

Figure 8: Recommendations regarding how the Oral Examination could be more effective as an assessment tool

	STUDENTS FROM GAELTACHT SCHOOLS	STUDENTS FROM IRISH-MEDIUM COLLEGES	STUDENTS FROM ENGLISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS
Omit the Picture Sequences	7	8	13
Reduce the number of Picture Sequences	8	4	20
Use unseen Picture Sequences	5	4	3
Increase the number of marks for the Oral Examination	4	3	2
Place more emphasis on the Conversation, allowing the students to use natural, everyday Irish	16	5	13
Extend the duration of the Oral Examination	8	5	4
Use a wider and more diverse range of questions	4	4	
Include continuous assessment, especially from third year onwards	0	0	3
Omit the Poetry Reading	1	0	0
Practise, practise, practise for the Oral Examination – speak Irish!	9	0	3
Separate from the Oral Examination in the other modern languages	1	0	0
Discuss a document/picture like the other modern languages	0	2	3
A separate Oral Examination for Higher Level and Ordinary Level	0	0	3

Long-term impact of the Oral Examination

Long-term language acquisition

According to more than 76% of students (88% from Gaeltacht schools, 76% from Irish-medium college, 54% from English-medium schools and 95% from the Irish language stream), the Oral Examination in Irish and the preparatory process for the Oral Examination assists them to acquire spoken Irish in the long term.

Further skills development

KEY POINTS

As for the potential of the Oral Examination to foster other skills and talents, such as working with others, creativity, etc., in learners, skills that will help them in the future, 67% agreed that the Oral Examination nurtures these kind of skills.

As for those who agreed with this, the following was said:

'I would love to work with the Irish language."

"The language is very important to me and I will continue speaking it in the future."

"I agree, as I became a lot more confident speaking it and enjoyed it! A lot more jobs should be through Irish!"

"Irish is very valuable. I learned the richness of the language during the Leaving Cert. I'm very eager to maintain my Irish at university and in my career as well."

"The interpersonal conversation helped me a lot. The oral examination was like an interview, that is a good preparation for life."

"the development of students' competence in the use of highly proficient, advanced-level Irish."

"I can get a job anywhere in the Gaeltacht and I would be able to converse with the locals or get a job doing primary school teaching, etc."

As for the those who disagreed, the following was said:

"I have had Irish since primary school and I don't believe that the examination added to my speaking skills, but we were happy afterwards."

"I had that Irish anyway."

"I learned these skills at home and in school and I didn't practise for the oral examination."

"There's only 15 minutes of talking, it isn't too difficult."

"I'm already a fluent speaker. It didn't add to my spoken skills."

It is clear that these students were focusing more on speaking skills – the last question rather than this particular question – but still, the feedback is interesting.

Qualitative focus: student voice

As previously stated, the same questions, more or less, were asked in the three student groups as the teachers in order to get their particular perspective. There were thirty three students between the three groups.

The route to the Oral Examination

Did you enjoy the time you spent in the classroom (in fifth and sixth year) preparing for the Oral Examination? Did the number of marks – 40% – encourage you? Or was it a source of anxiety for you? Did you like the emphasis on spoken Irish?[9]

KEY POINTS

The Oral Examination and the number of marks associated with it was a big source of anxiety for the students from the English-medium school and they did not enjoy the preparation process very much during their course of study, especially the rote learning associated with the Picture Sequences. The high number of marks for the Oral Examination did not cause any concern for the students from the Irish-medium college or the Gaeltacht school. They also enjoyed the preparatory process for the examination apart from the preparation for the Picture Sequences.

In short, the Oral Examination and the number of marks associated with it was a big source of anxiety for the students from the English-medium school and they did not enjoy the preparation process very much during their course of study. This related to the lack of use of the Irish language in their daily lives and, especially, to the way they felt they had to memorise every aspect of the preparation for the Oral Examination, the Picture Sequences in particular. Each and every one of them spoke negatively and critically of the number of Picture Sequences that they had to memorise.

The high number of marks for the Oral Examination did not cause any concern for the students from the Irish-medium college or the Gaeltacht school. As regards encouragement, there was a certain difference between the two schools: the students from the Irish-medium college said that the 40% did not encourage them much whereas most of the Gaeltacht school students were adamant that the 40% encouraged them. In both contexts, the students took great pleasure in displaying their speaking skills to the examiner. Both cohorts also greatly enjoyed the preparatory process for the Oral Examination apart from, in both cases again, the preparation for the Picture Sequences which involved the learning of specialised vocabulary and expressions that they would not use naturally in everyday conversation. There is a full account in Appendix 7 of all the students' answers.

Getting ready

Tell me how you prepared for the Oral Examination (a) in the classroom and (b) outside of the classroom?[10]

KEY POINTS

There was a significant difference in the preparation process between the English-medium school and the other two schools. The first school used various learning strategies such as conversation practice in the classroom, but rote learning, especially for the Picture Sequences, was the most commonly used learning method. In the case of the Irish-medium college and the Gaeltacht school, due to the students' fluency, rote learning was not as widespread as a learning method. It was used to some extent for the Picture Sequences but specialised vocabulary and rich expressions were learned rather than full passages of notes for each picture.

9 Questions from the students' focus groups

10 A question from the students' focus groups

Again, there was a significant difference in the preparation process, especially in the classroom context, between the English-medium school and the other two schools. The first school used various learning strategies including conversation practice in pairs in the classroom, random questions being asked by the teacher on various topics, etc., but rote learning, especially in relation to the Picture Sequences, was the most commonly used learning method. Outside of the classroom, as preparation for the examination, the same learning method with used for homework, especially in the run up to the Oral Examinations.

In the case of the Irish-medium college and the Gaeltacht school, due to the students' speaking fluency, rote learning was not as common as a learning method. Rote learning was used to some extent for the Picture Sequences but specialised vocabulary and rich expressions were learned rather than full passages of notes for each picture. A lot of time was spent on the Picture Sequences. As regards the Conversation, contemporary sources such as www.tuairisc.ie were used to increase their knowledge of current affairs with an emphasis on learning structures, expressions and specialised vocabulary to support not only the Oral Examination but Paper 1 as well. Outside of the classroom, homework reinforced the work done in school and closer to the Oral Examination, students practised in pairs, especially the Picture Sequences. There is a full account in Appendix 8 of all the students' answers.

Advice

If a student starting fifth or sixth year at school was seeking advice from you on how best to prepare for the Oral Examination, what kind of advice would you give them?[11]

It is widely agreed in every school that preparation should start at the beginning of fifth year (beginning of the Senior Cycle). This preparation was broken down into two major elements: the preparation for the Picture Sequences and more regular and more frequent use of spoken Irish inside and outside the classroom.

Each student in each school recommended starting the preparation at the beginning of fifth year (beginning of the Senior Cycle). However, they know that it is difficult to convince learners how important this is so early in the process. This preparation was broken down into two major elements: the preparation for the Picture Sequences and more regular and more frequent use of spoken Irish inside and outside the classroom. There is a full account in Appendix 9 of all the students' answers.

Speaking opportunities

Did the Oral Examination gave you a chance to demonstrate your speaking skills?[12]

KEY POINTS

The majority of students in all the schools said that the Oral Examination did not give them a proper opportunity to demonstrate their speaking skills (feedback which contradicted the results of the questionnaire). In the English-medium school, where the majority of the Oral Examination material was memorised, there was disappointment that they did not have an opportunity to show more of the material that they had learned for the conversation.

The Irish-medium college students in particular said that it was unfair that the Picture Sequences were available beforehand, allowing speakers in English-medium schools to memorise everything and achieving marks as high as those who had a great proficiency in the language.

The biggest grievance of the Gaeltacht school group was the brevity of the Oral Examination.

The brevity, the memorisation, the artificiality of the learning and assessment process for the Picture Sequences and the recording of the Oral Examination were sources of stress and pressure for all of them and this assessment tool was not viewed as an opportunity to convey whatever Irish they had.

11 A question from the students' focus groups

12 A question from the student questionnaire

Overall, the majority of students in all the schools said that the Oral Examination did not give them a proper opportunity to demonstrate their speaking skills. In the English-medium school – where the majority of the Oral Examination material was memorised – there was disappointment that they did not have an opportunity to show more of the material that they had learned for the conversation due to the brevity of the Oral Examination. It was also felt that a specialised form of Irish was used in the Picture Sequences and that the required learning involved with all the Sequences did not give them an opportunity to use 'natural' Irish. The brevity, the memory aspect, the artificiality of the learning and assessment process for the Picture Sequences and the recording of the Oral Examination were sources of stress and pressure for all of them and this assessment tool was not viewed as an opportunity to convey whatever Irish they had.

The Irish-medium college students in particular said that it was unfair that the Picture Sequences were available beforehand, allowing speakers in English-medium schools to memorise everything with rote learning and achieving marks as high as those who were fluent in the language. They were dissatisfied with the variation in standard regarding the complexity of the Picture Sequences' subject matter and with the formulaic approach in respect of the questions asked by the examiner. Some suggested a separate Oral Examination for students like them whereby the Picture Sequences would be unseen and that this would be recognised with a different marking system with, for example, extra points like Project Maths. The biggest grievance of the Gaeltacht school group was the brevity. They suggested that the Oral Examination last a few extra minutes. There is a full account in Appendix 10 of all the students' answers.

What two recommendations would you have to improve the Oral Examination?[13]

Key recommendations:

- Reduce the number of Picture Sequences (English-medium school)
- Make the Picture Sequences unseen (Irish-medium college and Gaeltacht school)
- Continuous assessment of spoken Irish
- Assessment by the Irish teacher, perhaps in conjunction with an external examiner
- Instead of the poetry reading, have an unseen prose extract to read and answer questions on it
- Make the poems unseen
- Picture to talk about[14]

Did the Oral Examination arm you with any additional skills – lifelong skills?[15]

Regardless of the school context, the students did not think that the Oral Examination and the preparatory process for it offered many long-term skills, especially proficiency in spoken Irish.[16]

13 A question from the students' focus groups

14 See Appendix 11 for a full account of all the students' answers.

15 A question from the students' focus group**S**

16 There is a full account in Appendix 12 of all the students' answers.

Conclusions

Overall, the high number of marks allocated to the Oral Examination – 40% – is creating a sense of motivation rather than concern among students, especially in the case of schools that teach through the medium of Irish. Both teachers and students are happy, for the most part, with the number of marks allocated to the Oral Examination.

The Picture Sequences, however, are the main cause of anxiety and grievance among students and teachers alike – both the amount and the students' understanding that they must be memorised – especially in the case of English-medium schools. The variation in the complexity of material in the Sequences was also referenced as well as the specialised type of language which is required to speak about the Sequences. The Sequences dominate the preparation for the Oral Examination and the teaching and learning approaches that take place in schools, regardless of the school context. Work begins on the Picture Sequences at the beginning of fifth year and this considerable work continues until the Oral Examinations begin. While some activity-based strategies are utilised, rote learning is the most common learning method used for the Picture Sequences. This raises big questions about the effectiveness of the Picture Sequences as a major aspect of the Oral Examination.

Another source of anxiety was the brevity and its proximity to the Oral Examinations in the other modern languages. The majority of teachers and students are in favour of an Oral Examination that lasts an extra few minutes. The extra time would allow students to better demonstrate their oral competence in the Conversation and it would allow the Examiner to use a wider variety of questions.

Irish is used as much as possible as a medium of teaching and communication in English-medium schools. Students enjoy speaking Irish but the biggest obstacle to them being independent learners is the lack of opportunities to speak the language outside of the classroom. The evidence shows the extra challenge these students face to achieve language proficiency to a high standard.

Teachers are unhappy with the literature course, especially the course content. In the Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, the lack of challenge and the brevity of the course is especially criticised. This complaint shows that a review is needed of this part of the Irish course.

The Oral Examination is having a certain influence – in English-medium schools – on the number of students choosing the Higher Level paper. The Leaving Certificate Oral Examination also has a certain influence on the number of schools doing the Optional Oral Examination at Junior Certificate level.

It is clear, from the evidence gathered, that there was only a slight difference in the opinions and perspectives of the students and teachers, especially regarding the preparation process for the Oral Examination, and this raises questions about the potential dependence of students on their teachers.

Finally, in the teacher focus groups, where the sensitive issue regarding two separate Oral Examinations for English-medium schools and Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools was discussed, it is clear from the evidence that more research is needed to focus on the needs of the various linguistic contexts regarding curriculum provision and the assessment approach to give students a proper challenge (first and second language students, Gaeltacht students and native speakers).

Implications

- The 'Student Voice' had a central role in this research. More investigation and emphasis is needed on the importance of the 'Student Voice' in any review process of the curriculum and assessment that will happen in the future.
- Both teachers and students had the same attitude regarding the function of the Oral Examination: the strongest emphasis was placed on prepared learning and rote learning. This attitude is fostering a culture and an approach which does not concur with the international emphasis on the importance of self-directed learning in the language acquisition process. This raises a major question about the aim of language learning in general, both language acquisition and learning a second language.
- From the evidence gathered, questions are raised about the effectiveness of the Oral Examination as an assessment tool. Does the Oral Examination give the student an appropriate opportunity to show their language and communication skills? Are there more effective ways of assessing this? Can a once-off testing of any language skill be reliable or valid? Does it support the students to enable them to be active members of the language community? [17] It is clear from the evidence that more research is needed to focus on the needs of the various linguistic contexts regarding curriculum provision and the assessment approach to provide students a proper challenge (first and second language students, Gaeltacht students and native speakers). These questions require more research for those who are dealing with curriculum and assessment design, initial educators, teachers, educators and State policy makers.

17 See: The General Aims of the Oral Examination for the Leaving Certificate

Appendices

Appendix 1

Teacher Questionnaire

The Route to the Oral Examination

1. Select your school's context:

☐ Gaeltacht school ☐ English-medium school ☐ Irish Unit/Stream
Irish-medium college

2. Do you think that the Oral Examination has any impact on the level taken by the students? For example, the number of marks allocated to it, its assessment type, etc. Tick any box which describes your own experience.

☐ It encourages more students to take Higher Level

☐ It encourages more students to take Ordinary Level rather than Higher Level

☐ It encourages more students to take Ordinary Level rather than Foundation Level

☐ It encourages more students to take Foundation Level rather than Ordinary Level

☐ The Oral Examination has no impact on the paper level taken by the students

3. The Oral Examination has different parts: 1. Welcome; 2. Poetry reading; 3. Picture Sequence; 4. General Conversation. With this **variety**:

The students have more **interest** in studying and in preparing for the Oral Examination

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

They are more **confident** in terms of achievement

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

The students are more **enthusiastic** about improving their verbal skills **in general**, not just for examinations

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

4. While you are fostering students' verbal skills and preparing them for the Oral Examination, what are the teaching strategies you use the most in the Irish classroom? *Tick each one you use.*

☐ I give them notes for the picture sequences and I encourage the students to learn them and practice them

☐ A lot of time is spent preparing and practicing answers for the questions asked in the general conversation

☐ I regularly use active learning strategies which promote communication in any part of the course, e.g. pair/group work which encourages them to produce language

☐ I regularly record the students as they speak and I play the recordings back to them to support them in developing their speaking skills

☐ Only Irish is allowed as a medium of communication and teaching/learning in the Irish language classroom

Do you use any other strategy not mentioned above?

5. 40% of the marks for Irish go towards the Oral Examination. From your own experience, what impact does this have on the students' feelings and motivation? Tick only one box.

☐ The 40% motivates them ☐ The 40% adds to their anxiety ☐ The 40% doesn't impact at all

6. Tick only **one box** here:

☐ 40% is too much for the Irish Oral Examination
☐ 40% is the correct percentage for the Irish Oral Examination
☐ I would prefer if 50% was available for the Oral Examination
☐ there shouldn't be an Oral Examination

Why?

7. It is recognised that more work and preparation is required outside the classroom to improve speaking skills as well as what can be done in the classroom. Do you think that students spend much time on this in their own time? Tick whichever box best describes your own experience:

☐ They spend a lot of time on it ☐ They spend some time on it ☐ They don't spend much time on it

8. Preparation for the Oral Examination in school began:

☐ At the beginning of fifth year
☐ Sometime in fifth year
☐ At the beginning of sixth year
☐ Three or four months before the Oral Examination

9. Which of these most describes the way you approach planning for fostering and improving the students' speaking skills for the Oral Examination? (If more than one box is relevant, rate them according to relevance)

- ☐ We have a specific class every week in sixth year for oral work and we will spend that period preparing for the Oral Examination closer to the time
- ☐ Irish is used as a means of communication and as a means of teaching/learning in the Irish language classroom and this is how speaking skills were fostered in the students. Then, an intensive period of preparation for the Oral Examination was expended closer to the time.
- ☐ An effort is made to develop the students' speaking skills as part of each class by using activity-based learning strategies as often as possible and then an intensive period of preparation is spent for the Oral Examination closer to the time.

We plan in another way:

10. Due to the fact that 40% of the marks are allocated to the Oral Examination, a lot of time is needed to foster the students' speaking skills. However there are many other areas that need to be studied as part of the Irish course. Where is the majority of time spent on those other areas? (Give your answer from 1-7, with 1 representing the most time down to 7 representing the least.)

- ☐ Composition (Essays, Debates, etc.)
- ☐ Irish grammar and accuracy
- ☐ Literature
- ☐ The Oral Examination
- ☐ Reading comprehension
- ☐ Fostering listening skill
- ☐ Aspects outside of the 'course', e.g. literature, drama, history of the Irish language, cultural aspects, etc.

11. A large number of marks goes towards the Irish Oral Examination. This means that teachers do not have enough time to spend on other areas of the Irish Syllabus and it creates pressure for both teachers and students

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

12. Due to the amount of marks given, 40% for the Oral Examination, changes had to be made to other parts of the course

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

The Oral Examination

13. The Oral Examination gives an appropriate opportunity to students to show their speaking skills in Irish

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

14. The Oral Examination lasts for about 15 minutes. This is:

☐ Far too long ☐ Just the right length ☐ Far too short
☐ On the long side ☐ On the short side

15. The Oral Examination is appropriately **challenging** for the Irish Leaving Certificate student

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Why?

16. **The Welcome**

It helps students to settle down

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

There's no need for the 'Fáiltiú'

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

There shouldn't be any marks awarded to the 'Fáiltiú'

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

17. **Poetry Reading**

The Poetry Reading is a good way to test reading skills, phonetic aspects and understanding of the language and, as a result, this part of the Oral Examination is important.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

18. **The Picture Sequence.**

The Picture Sequence gives the students a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the examiner

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

The Picture Sequences shouldn't be seen by the students in advance

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

How was the Picture Sequence prepared for?

☐ Students learned the notes off by heart ☐ A mix of both

☐ Immersion in Irish and practice

19. **The General Conversation**

The General Conversation gives the students a good opportunity to display their verbal skills to the examiner

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

How was the General Conversation prepared for?

☐ Students learned the material/answers off by heart ☐ A mix of both

☐ Immersion in Irish and practice

Is there any other approach that should be used?

20. The Irish Oral Examination is an assessment tool that tests the students' spoken proficiency in the Irish language. What two recommendations would you have to make the Oral Examination even more effective as an assessment tool?

1.

2.

Long-term benefit

21. The Irish Oral Examination and the learning/preparation process for the Oral Examination helps students to acquire spoken Irish on a long term basis, i.e. not just for the Leaving Certificate examination

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

22. The Oral Examination and the learning/preparation process for the Oral Examination fosters other skills and talents in the students which help them in their lives in the future e.g. cooperating with others, communication ability, creativity, etc.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Why?

Thank you for answering all of these questions!

Appendix 2

The focus groups

1. 40% of the marks for Irish go towards the Oral Examination. You were asked in the questionnaire to discuss the impact this – the 40% – has on the students' feelings and motivation. Would you like to comment further on this? (Questionnaire: The 40% motivates them/The 40% adds to their anxiety/The 40% has no impact)

2. You were asked in the questionnaire to discuss your planning for fostering and improving the students' speaking skills for the Oral Examination. (Questionnaire: We have a specific class every week in sixth year for oral work and we will spend that period preparing for the Oral Examination closer to the time/Irish is used as a medium of communication and teaching/learning in the Irish language classroom. Then an intense period is spent preparing for the Oral Examination closer to the time/An effort is made to develop the students' speaking skills as part of each class by using activity-based learning strategies as often as possible and then an intensive period of preparation is spent for the Oral Examination closer to the time.

3. The Irish Oral Examination is an assessment tool that tests the students' spoken proficiency in the Irish language.

   Do you agree with this? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   What two recommendations would you have to make the Oral Examination even more effective as a tool?

   1.

   2.

4. One of the goals of the Oral Examination and the learning/preparation process for the Oral Examination is to help students to acquire spoken Irish on a long term basis, i.e. not just for the Leaving Certificate examination.

   Do you agree with this? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   What about other skills and talents, e.g. general communication skills, creativity, etc.

5. Do you think that the Oral Examination has any impact on the paper level taken by the students? (For example, the number of marks allocated to it, its assessment type, etc.) Are you being encouraged to take a certain level of paper?

6. A large number of marks goes towards the Irish Oral Examination. What impact does this have on other aspects of the Irish course/syllabus?

7. Did the amendments to the Oral Examination that were implemented in recent years have any impact on the Optional Oral Examination for the Junior Certificate in your school, i.e. did it encourage you to take it?

Appendix 3

Student questionnaire

The Route to the Oral Examination

1. Select your school's context:

☐ Gaeltacht school ☐ Irish-medium college ☐ English-medium schools Irish Unit/Stream

2. The Oral Irish examination encouraged me to take:

☐ Higher Level ☐ Foundation Level

☐ Ordinary Level ☐ had no influence at all on my decision

3. I enjoyed my time spent in the classroom preparing for the Oral Irish examination.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

4. The Oral Irish examination involves the following variety of components: 1. Welcome; 2. Reading a piece of poetry; 3. Picture sequence; 4. General conversation. This **variety** made me feel:

More **interested** in studying and preparing for the exam.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

More **confident** of doing well

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

More **enthusiastic** about improving my Oral Irish skills **in general** - not just for exam purposes

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. The way that my teacher taught us and worked with us in preparing for the Oral Irish examination was different from the way he/she worked with us in other areas of the course (e.g. the written paper)

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

6. Turning now to the kind of preparation you undertook in school for **the Picture Sequences,** please answer the following:

   The kind of preparation I undertook for **the Picture Sequences** made me feel:

   More **interested** in studying for this section of the Oral

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

   More **confident** of doing well in this section of the Oral

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

   More **enthusiastic** about improving my Oral Irish skills **in general** - not just for this section of the Oral

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

7. **The General Conversation:** The kind of preparation I undertook for the **General Conversation** made me feel:

   More **interested** in studying for this section of the Oral

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

   More **confident** of doing well in this section of the Oral

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

   More **enthusiastic** about improving my Oral Irish skills **in general** - not just for this section of the Oral

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

8. 40% of the marks are being allocated to the Oral examination. This 40%:

   was an incentive/motivation to me

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

   the 40% added to my anxiety

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

   the 40% didn't impact at all

   ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Disagree

   ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Disagree

9. A language involves listening, reading, speaking and reading. Therefore, it is appropriate to allocate 40% to the oral exam.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

tell me more about why you think this

10. Rate the effort you put into enhancing your oral language skills outside of the classroom:

☐ Great effort ☐ Medium ☐ Little effort ☐ None

11. we started preparing for the Oral examination in school (*tick 1 box)*:

☐ at the beginning of 5th year ☐ at the beginning of 6th year

☐ sometime during 5th year ☐ 3/4 months before the Oral

12. rate the amount of time spent in school promoting and developing oral language skills:

☐ a lot ☐ some time ☐ not much time was spent
little time was spent

13. Rank from 1 to 7 where most time was spent in class (1 for that on which most time was spent down to 7 for that on which least time was spent):

— Composition (Essays, Debates, etc.)
— Irish grammar and accuracy
— literature (prose and poetry)
— the Oral Examination
— reading comprehension
— the skill of listening
— aspects outside of the 'course', e.g. literature, drama, Irish language history, aspects of culture, etc.

14. How challenged do you feel by the current Irish course?

☐ Strongly challenged ☐ Adequately challenged ☐ Not sufficiently challenged

15. do you want more of a challenge?

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ maybe

The Oral Examination

16. the Oral Irish examination gave me an opportunity to show my oral language skills

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

17. the current length of the Oral Irish examination which lasts approx. 15 mins. is:

☐ far too long ☐ just right ☐ way too short
☐ on the long side ☐ on the short side

18. I found my Oral Irish exam:

☐ appropriately challenging for me ☐ not challenging enough ☐ too challenging

19. **The introductory part of the Oral exam.**

it helped me settle down

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

there's no need for the 'Fáiltiú'

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

There shouldn't be any marks awarded to the 'Fáiltiú'

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

20. **Poetry Reading.**

Poetry Reading is a good way of testing reading skills, pronunciation and an understanding of the language and so, this an important section of the Oral exam

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

21. **The Picture Sequence**

The Picture Sequence gave me a good chance to show off my language skills to the examiner:

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

The Picture Sequence should be an unseen Sequence

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

How did you prepare for the Picture Sequence?

☐ I learned them by heart ☐ Immersion and practice in the language ☐ bit of both

22. now that you have completed the Oral Irish exam., what do you consider to be the best way to prepare for the Picture Sequence?

☐ I learned them by heart ☐ Immersion and practice in the language ☐ bit of both

Please elaborate:

23. **The General Conversation.**

The General Conversation gave me a good chance to show off my language skills to the examiner:

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

The questions related to my life and the lives of young people

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

24. How did you prepare for the General Conversation?

☐ I learned them by heart ☐ Immersion and practice in the language ☐ bit of both

Now that you have completed the Oral Irish exam., what do you consider to be the best way to prepare for the General Conversation?

☐ I learned them by heart ☐ Immersion and practice in the language ☐ bit of both

Now that you have just been through the Oral Irish examination, give your top 2 suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the Oral Irish examination

1.

2.

Long-term benefit

25. Studying and preparing for the Oral Irish examination has given me the confidence to use whatever Irish I have in various social contexts in the future

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

26. Studying and preparing for the Oral Irish examination has fostered skills and attributes in me that will help me in the broader sense in the future, e.g. being able to get a job where Irish is required/can be used, being able to participate in the Irish community, communicative ability, etc.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Appendix 4

Student voice

Question 1:

Did you **enjoy** the time spent in Gaeilge class (5th and 6th year) **preparing for the Oral Irish** examination?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Question 2:

How did you prepare for the Oral Irish examination?

☐ In class ☐ Outside of class

Question 3:

What advice would you give to students going into fifth or sixth year next year as regards how best to prepare for the Oral Irish examination?

Question 4:

Did the Oral Irish examination give you an opportunity to show your oral language skills? How?

Question 5:

Give your top 2 suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the Oral Irish examination.

1.

2.

Question 6:

Do you think that studying and preparing for the Oral Irish examination has given you the skills and confidence to use whatever Irish you have in various social contexts in the future?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Appendix 5

Impact on the chosen paper level – students' answers from the questionnaire

English-medium schools

"I dropped to ordinary level because I found higher difficult, I find ordinary level much more capable. I really enjoy it now"

"Being in ordinary level, I found it easier to speak in Irish and if there was more emphasis on the oral I would have opted to take higher level"

"I chose ordinary level because I do not speak Irish well."

"I needed to do higher level Irish for my points. And 40% for the oral is a lot of marks"

"I have spoken the language since I was young and therefore it was a huge advantage doing an oral examination" (school with Irish-medium 'Stream')

"40% was going towards the overall grade" (school with Irish-medium 'Stream')

"Passion and points"

"I like Irish"

Irish-medium colleges (all Higher Level):

"I attend an all-Irish school"

"I am good at Irish because I go to an Irish-medium college"

"My School"

Gaeltacht schools (all Higher Level):

"I'm living in the Gaeltacht"

"I was always going to do higher level"

"I study in an all-Irish school"

"Fluent in Irish"

"There are a lot of marks for it"

"I have fluent Irish"

"I have fluent Irish". We speak Irish every day at home and at school, so it comes easily to me."

"Because I am fluent in Irish, I hope to attain the highest mark possible"

"Irish is my native language"

"I always speak Irish"

"Irish is my first language"

"Because it's worth 40%"

"I am a fluent Irish speaker."

"My Irish is perfect, why wouldn't I do Higher Level"

Appendix 6

Recommendations from students (from the questionnaire) to make the Oral Examination more effective

English-medium schools:

"Get rid of the Picture Sequence, or reduce the number to around 10 or 12"

"Take into consideration whether the student is Higher or Ordinary. If asking Ordinary hard questions, it could make them nervous and affect their grade."

"Make sure the examiner is interested, speaks clearly and is good at his job as the examiner I was given was extremely unprofessional and hard to understand, he mumbled his words a lot and also pretended to fall asleep as I was talking. I think all examiners should be tested by an external body."

"Make the course easier to understand and lower the number of picture sequences."

"Reduce the amount of picture sequences"

"Provide a strict syllabus and a guide of what to learn for the exam as the topics that may be discussed are very vague and leave students feeling that the need to learn a lot of abstract topics and be prepared for what probably won't be asked"

"Abolish it"

"Have a positive attitude at the beginning of fifth year. Do not ignore language accuracy".

"There should be less picture sequences because it is difficult to study them all. I didn't want to learn them off by heart but it was difficult when there were so many of them because I was getting mixed up. I think it would be better to do a longer examination. Give more time for the conversation as this is where all the skills are expressed."

"Have ideas on the topics of the conversation and be able to talk about them"

"Scrap the picture sequences. They are not a proper examination. More ordinary conversation based on young people's life. They do Role Plays in German, I think they would be very good at checking your Irish"

"Cut down the number of picture sequences because there are too many to feel completely confident in them and it adds to your worries for the exam. There should be a previously prepared item on a subject that students find interesting and will feel confident in answering questions for example the French document."

"Cut down the number of Picture Sequences. Have a definite topic that students can prep for fully in advance. Students should have the option for a show and tell type part, i.e. bring in something they want to talk about, like the French document in the French oral."

"Decrease the number of picture sequences so that students are encouraged to try harder for the ones that they do have. 20 is too much. Promote speaking Irish more in schools and not just for the oral exam"

"Decreasing the amount of picture sequences to 10."

"Make the general questions more structured."

"Do not learn every answer off by heart, you will be there all day and you will bore the examiner. Try to sound like you're engaging in general conversation and make sure to use loads and loads of expressions. Practising in front of a mirror was really useful for me and I also recorded myself while saying my picture sequences and I listened to them whenever I had the chance! Speak SLOWLY"

"Don't make the course too long, difficult and boring. A big difference should be made between higher and ordinary level in terms of the amount of topics and work given to each level"

"Either take out the Picture Sequence or reduce the number of them. Have more poems than Picture Sequences"

"Get rid of the picture sequences or reduce the number of them and raise the marks associated with the Oral"

"Get rid of the picture sequences. There is no need for them and everyone was more worried about them than the conversation itself. If the sequences are not axed, the amount of pictures should be reduced"

"Get rid of the picture sequences. More than 15 minutes to talk to the examiner."

"Get rid of the picture sequence. They're unfair as some examiners let you choose what picture sequence you want whereas other examiners don't, I know this isn't how it's meant to be but it will happen as the examiner feels bad for the student and asks them before what picture they want. However, in another room people don't get to choose what picture they want and therefore this is completely unfair and corrupt."

"Get rid of picture sequences and focus more on general conversation"

"Get rid of the picture sequences or else have unseen pictures. They are a complete waste of time and not a true test of the students' Irish"

"Half the amount of Picture Sequences. Give more marks to the conversation"

"Have less picture sequences and less topics"

"Have ten pictures"

"I strongly believe the Picture Sequences were a waste of valuable time that could have been appointed to more immersion and practice in the language. I think that 20 pictures were too much and it took away time I could have been expanding my vocabulary in Irish. I think the oral should consume the majority of the marks as it is what is most important in the sense of having a fluency and understanding of the language."

"I think that a lot more emphasis should be placed on speaking the language rather than learning off reams of information and regurgitating it on the day of the written exam. I also think that students should be allowed to choose which picture sequence they would like to do."

"I think the number of picture sequences are too much. I would reduce the number to 10. Secondly, the actual oral length should be longer. Instead of 15 minutes it should be at least 20."

"I would have studied more and tried to feel more comfortable when I was speaking it"

"I would like to see at least 10 Picture Sequences on the course as I feel like this would be an ideal number for students to learn. I would also like to see the percentage the oral is worth decrease to at least 20% as I feel 40% puts too much stress and pressure onto students"

"It was very hard to find anything to talk about (even in English) for some of the picture sequences. Grammar should receive more attention in the teaching of Irish as it is hard to form sentences fluently while questioning your grammar."

"Learn picture sequences from the start of fifth year and learn basic topics for the general conversation really well and have something that is unique to you and be able to talk about it well."

"Less picture sequences to learn, and made a bit easier for those of lower levels"

"Less picture sequences. Less percentage towards oral"

"Less picture sequences. Nicer examiners"

"Lower the percentage. Lower the amount of picture sequences"

"Make the picture sequences and same with the poetry as the will improve the students vocabulary rather than memory skills"

"Don't bother with the picture sequences or have less of them (10 for example)"

"I shouldn't see the Picture Sequence in advance. More natural speaking during the general conversation."

"Less picture sequences. More emphasis on current affairs"

"More emphasis on the general conversation. Make the picture sequences unseen".

"Only 10 picture sequences, more of a general conversation – nothing about politics, etc."

"People should read a news article as they cant learn that off it should be unseen. The conversation should be possibly a little longer as the student might be able to settle more. Sequence unseen"

"Read a piece from some unseen extract instead of a poem"

"Practice and immersing in speaking the language"

"Practice speaking out loud with family or friends, you can learn a lot and help each other to improve. Also learn the picture sequences as you go, there are way too many of them and if you don't learn them as you go you will get 'snowed under' with them"

"reduce the number of pictures we have to learn be a bit easier on ordinary level, not all of us are Irish"

"Reduce the number of picture sequences. Have the examiner pick out two and give the student the chance to see them both and choose one in the exam."

"Split it into 2 parts and have one of the exams at the end of 5th year"

"Allow more time for the conversation, ask harder questions. Reduce the amount of picture sequences to fifteen or so and make the stories more interesting."

"Take out the picture sequence!!!! I think it's more important to be able to have a general conversation and I think that should last for a bit longer"

"The amount of picture sequences should be reduced as I think there is too much pressure on students to know 20 sequences very well. I think there should be a set list of topic areas that could come up in the general conversation as the amount we have to cover to be confident is too extensive."

"The picture sequences should be abolished. The conversation should be made longer"

"There should be only 10 picture sequences"

Irish-medium colleges: Highlight

"Get rid of the picture sequences – have a longer conversation"

"Longer conversation, there was lots of pressure and I only got the opportunity to speak on a few different topics. No picture sequences"

"Get rid of the Picture Sequences, it is an Irish examination and learning a story does not help your language skills. You're not going to use the information in that story again if it is only learned off by heart ... People don't really understand what they are saying."

"People can also enter the conversation and start speaking rapidly about something without stopping"

" Get rid of the picture sequences! They are too stressful because everyone is only learning them off by heart, personally they are the one thing that scared me."

"Be careful with the questions in the general conversation, the students are put in a bind if they don't have much knowledge on a particular topic, e.g. something in the news: maybe they hadn't heard anything about it"

"Reduce as many picture sequences as possible and make them unseen beforehand"

"I think 20 picture sequences is excessive, maybe decrease the amount to 15 or even 10. I think the conversation is very good. Maybe it isn't long enough to properly express the person's language."

"Ask us more difficult questions, that people can't prepare for."

"Do something about the picture sequences, they are neither suitable nor helpful. They were a terrible idea. Obviously, there was little research conducted or few discussions held with young people before they threw it on the course. That was reckless. It must be ensured that each examiner puts the students at ease and that they don't feel uncomfortable in their company."

"Get rid of the picture sequences. Let the candidate prepare a picture or document, like French, and talk about things they are interested in."

"Get rid of the picture sequences. There is no skill involved with them apart from learning off by heart for students in English-medium secondary schools"

"Get rid of the picture sequences because they are a waste of time in my opinion or it would be better to reduce the amount of pictures. Approximately 10 instead of 20."

"In my view there is little need for the introductory part (fáiltiú) and more marks are required for the picture sequences because they take up most of the preparation and are the hardest part."

"Let the picture sequences be confidential until you enter the Oral. Do likewise with the poems"

"Make the oral exam longer as the picture sequence etc. takes up a lot of time"

"Do the picture sequences on the spot having not seem them previously and don't ask us stupid questions"

"I don't think the picture sequences should be there. I also think that the general conversation should be longer."

"There shouldn't be any learning off by heart involved, it's an oral examination not a memory examination. Focus more on the general conversation/spend more time on the general conversation."

"Allow more time if necessary. Harder questions for people who are comfortable and who have good Irish"

"Allow more time. More marks for accuracy."

"A wider range of picture sequences and more marks for them."

"Picture Sequence in the middle of the oral. Something you can bring in and talk about on the day, like French"

"Stop allowing people to learn paragraphs off by heart. Make the picture sequence unseen. Remove the reading of poetry. Talk about things in the General conversation that young people care about, not 'social problems'. Introduce a document/photo like in the French oral?"

Gaeltacht schools:

"Practise more speaking in Irish every day and outside of the classroom. Talk about things you are interested in"

"Less picture sequences because they add to the pressure you feel approaching the examination to have them learned, or not have them given to you in advance and ask students to enter without having seen them."

"Allow more time for the examination and ask a wider range of questions to show the student's proficiency"

"Get rid of the picture sequences – they are meaningless because students can learn them off by heart."

"The examiner should allow the student to give great long answers to questions if they are fluent"

"You must draw your own picture for the thing that interests you personally and talk about it."

"More emphasis on Spain's economic affairs because I was born in Bilbao and I moved here because I was homeless."

"Have it on a date that is further apart from the other oral examinations, e.g.: Spanish

"Less picture sequences"

"Allow more time. I didn't like the picture sequences at all – change them"

"Make the examination longer"

"Make the Picture Sequence unseen and harder. The examination was too short so I would like to recommended that the examination be lengthened."

"I wish it was longer. Put less picture sequences on the course"

"There should be a smaller range of picture sequences and the students should know what picture sequences are involved. Apart from that, there's not much else to say."

"Be ready for the talking, learn everything"

"Award a higher percentage for the Oral and put more emphasis on the general conversation than the poems."

"I don't think there is a need for that amount of picture sequences. They should be reduced in volume. Don't ask questions that are too personal like family matters, etc. because they could be separated."

"I don't think the picture sequence should be seen in advance. I think that more emphasis should be placed on the general conversation."

"Practise talking about any subject in Irish"

"Keep practising and trying to speak Irish to others in the locality"

"Keep practising and speak the language any chance you get."

"Scrap the picture sequences. Study more for the general conversation"

"Practise as much as you can and get used to everything. Don't leave anything out. There is 40% available, try to get it."

"Practise the picture sequences and read over the poems you have to read during the oral. Talk generally to the students in your class about your personal life and the environment and all the things you need to practise for the oral exam."

"Get rid of the picture sequences. Extend it to 20 minutes."

"Get rid of the picture sequences. Award 25% for the oral examination"

"Do away with the picture sequences or get rid of at least 10 of them. Bring a picture in and talk about it instead of the general conversation."

"Drop the picture sequences. Spend more time on the general conversation"

"Learn a few topics that you are interested in. Then when you are in the examination, highlight the fact that you are interested in those topics and the conversation will go in that direction naturally. Learn some of the richness of the Irish language to get extra points"

"No poetry"

"Speak out in your own natural Irish and it will get you a good bit of the way"

"Speak the language aloud and practise with another person. Learn a lot of proverbs/expressions"

"Let the students pick the picture sequence themselves"

"The students shouldn't see the picture sequences in advance. The conversation should be broader, e.g. talk about major issues of the day."

"Longer for students who are fluent. I felt that it was too short and there were a lot of things I wanted to talk about but there wasn't enough time"

"Less picture sequences for us"

"Less picture sequences. Less learning off by heart"

"More emphasis on the conversation and harder questions"

"More emphasis on the conversation. "Make it longer"

"More emphasis on hobbies. Less marks for the picture sequences and more for the general conversation. Make the examination worth 50% instead of 40%"

"More about yourself, more time. Less picture sequences – 10 instead of 20"

"Speak more Irish and listen more to Raidió na Gaeltachta to improve and enrich the level of Irish.

"Speak more Irish at home. Less marks for the picture sequence"

"More points for the oral exam. Read two poems"

"No I think it's perfect"

"OK"

"Give the candidate a chance to see the picture sequence beforehand."

"Produce picture sequences that are not seen in advance. This means a more level playing field for students. Allow a longer stretch of time. Even 5 additional minutes."

"The pictures should be given on the day rather than be given to the students at the start of the year. This gives the students an opportunity to learn all of the 20 pictures off which isn't the point of the pictures. The point of the pictures is to test the level of Irish you have, not how well you can learn things off"

Appendix 7

Student Voice – The Route to the Oral Examination: Enjoyment and Motivation

Did you enjoy *the time you spent in the classroom (in fifth and sixth year) preparing for the Oral Examination? Did the number of marks – 40% – encourage you? Or was it a source of anxiety for you? Did you like the emphasis on spoken Irish?*

English-medium school:

"It was stressful ... I dunno, it's just ... 40%'s a lot" (1:33)

"I felt more under pressure like, when French was only 20%" (1:51)

"Cos we don't use it every day, so we, like, had to spend, like, the full week constantly talkin' Irish, when we hadn't been used to speakin' it for the whole year ... for the past few years, we hadn't been speakin' Irish, like, daily, like, and, if we had, like, it would be just a small bit in the class, but then leadin' up to it ..." (2:08)

"Yeh, but you wouldn't take much notice of it back in fifth year ... it seems like it's so far away and before ya know it, it's Christmas and then it's all, like, in on top of ya" (2:58)

"Preparin' for the conversation was good, but the Picture Sequence was the worst ... there was just so many of them" (3:23)

"I thought preparin' for it was, like, more stressful than actually doin' it ... it was like a nightmare ... it was just too much pressure to learn off just big blocks of sentences for nothing, like ... and, like, most of the questions didn't even come up, like ... like, we learned about, like, technology and all, like ... the points system and stuff like that" (3:38)

"Some questions came up for some of us and not for others, like ... say the section that she was more prepared on than I was, then the section she was more prepared on came up for me and not for her" (4:42)

"It was mostly stressful ... 20 Picture Sequences, you only need 1, so you're wastin' time on 19 (Picture Sequences) ... you're learnin' as much as you can for 19" (5:10)

Irish-medium college:

"We're kind of fluent here, so it didn't encourage us that much, but I think it (the Oral Examination) was more helpful than the theory" (the written paper) (1:17)

"The Pictures Sequences are kind of separate because, I'd say that we got more enjoyment out of the conversation and that kind of thing, cos that was natural speaking as opposed to the Picture Sequences where everyone was like learning and using words that you wouldn't normally use" (2:44)

"More encouragement than anxiety" (4:02)

"I wasn't worried at all about the conversation or about anything in the Oral ... more courage than anxiety" (4:13)

"You're not doing one hundred percent of the exam at the one time ... if you make a mistake in the Oral, you still have the written one" (4:49)

"The 40% is good, spoken Irish is more important in everyday life than written Irish if you are trying to boost the Irish language" (5:20)

"In the Oral, you need to understand spoken Irish in order to speak it, but in the written paper you can learn and write things off by heart, you don't need to understand what you are writing" (6:44)

Gaeltacht school:

"We didn't use books ... we used natural Irish" (1:35)

"It gives us a break from the standard Irish in the books and an opportunity to use the area's natural Irish" (1:44)

"It (the 40%) encouraged us to learn the words for the Picture Sequence ... because we knew that we had the pass then" (2:32)

"It's a good thing (the 40%)" (4:20)

Appendix 8

Student voice – Preparation for the Oral Examination

English-medium school:

"We worked in pairs ... say, I was examinin' for 1 thing and then the other person would answer and then we'd change, *vice versa* ... let's say there was a topic and we'd take the main questions out of the topic and they'd ask "what did you do at the weekend" or whatever and you'd have to answer it all different ways and mix them up, just like the Examiner would be askin' ya" (6:13)

"At home, like, say, I'd get a family member to ask me the questions as well" (6:47)

"In class, just, as he said like, just between the 2 of us, we'd maybe go through them and, like, give each others answers and then maybe at home, do a Picture Sequence a night". (6:54)

"But at home it's harder .. if your Mam or anything doesn't know how to pronounce the Irish words and you're trying to get her to ask you questions but you've no clue what she's saying" (7:15)

"Only for the last couple of weeks (practising at home) ... I didn't really do much before that" (7:32)

"We had our Mocks coming right up after Christmas so we were basically, more or less, all the time studying for them, so we didn't have enough time" (8:07)

"The teacher just asked, like, random questions, like, she wouldn't be, like, right, we're doing 'family', she'd just, like, say, "what's your date of birth?" ... it got you thinkin', like, it made you think on your feet" (9:08)

"I was goin' to and then I didn't (go to the Gaeltacht last summer) cos it's a lot of money to be askin' for" (10:47)

Irish-medium college:

"It was the Picture Sequences in the classroom, we didn't do much of anything else cos everyone here is, like, fluent, like, we didn't need to do work on 'myself', like, ... " (8:05)

"There were intensive classes over in ---- (another town) for the Picture Sequence ... that was connected to the school" (8:49)

"There were some after-school classes held in our school, we finished early on Fridays so we had time to wait around after school and work on the Picture Sequence ... after the Mocks" (9:05)

"We did a lot of paired conversation work also" (9:39)

"I went to my aunt, she's from Gweedore in Donegal, I was always having a paired conversation with her ... she now lives here in ----" (9:58)

"Small things like the poetry reading and underlining lenitions and eclipses just to ensure full marks" (10:25)

"And listening to the television ... my parents speak Irish so we were watching it" (10:42)

"Meeting after school ... in pairs ... the Picture Sequences" (10:55)

(Watching TG4) "maybe the sport, Live Rugby ..." (11:14)

"We used tuairisc.ie ... at home ... it's good for essays too ... the Irish found in the books isn't natural, it is, what's the word, too academic, but it is natural on tuairisc.ie" (11:36)

"We are kind of familiar with natural Irish and you know when people are speaking from books and when people are speaking, like, wholeheartedly, or something like that, you know ... you know the grammar is perfect (in the books) but you would prefer to have more natural Irish that you'll understand" (12:49)

"I know that it's a good thing but there is too much emphasis being placed on grammar now and people don't want to speak it anymore" (13:16)

Gaeltacht school:

"Just, discussing things in the classroom and ... about the content of the Picture Sequences and what could come up in general" (6:03)

"Essays, so we learned what was written in the essays" (7:30)

"We were speaking Irish at home, we were always practising (7:58)

(Additional work outside of the classroom) "the Picture Sequences mostly ... I had written all the stories while learning them at home" (8:15)

Appendix 9

Student voice – advice for other students

English-medium school:

"Study well ahead, don't leave it till the last minute, study from the start, like ... I wouldn't leave the whole topic till the last minute ... I'd study from the start" (11:31)

"Learn the Picture Sequences off perfectly ... focus on one a week ... just learn one off until you know it perfectly and then do it all the way up from one to 20 and then, when you've done that, just revise them" (11:56)

"Probably just get a picture and learn it, just describe it perfectly, the way you would do it in English and translate it into Irish" (12:15)

"I don't think you're goin' to get the Picture Sequences perfectly, whether you learn them in advance or not, like, I think, like, I just think there's just so much pressure, like, what I done was I learned off, like, verbs and stuff and what you could say and then learned off key words, like a Picture Sequence, like an accident, you know, stuff like that ... I don't think it's any use tryin' to learn off sentences for 6 pictures" (12:33)

"I suppose I thought they'd be lookin' for was your ability to talk in Irish rather than learn stuff off, so what I'd recommend would be to speak more Irish at home or outside of school" (13:00)

"It's not realistic (speaking Irish outside of the classroom) ... like, in the country, there's not enough people speakin' Irish where you'd have to use it daily, like, if it was, like, say, in the Gaeltacht, where you'd have to speak Irish, like, you have no choice, everybody would catch on more" (13:40)

"Even in the classroom, just talk more" (13:59)

"It's not just the Picture Sequences in the Oral, so you could learn the Picture Sequences and do that (use spoken Irish) as well, both" (14:51)

"well, when you're learning the Picture Sequences, at least you're learnin' different phrases you can talk and then when you're learnin' the conversation, you can use that in the Picture Sequences as well" (15:01)

"The teachers are willin' to do that (use Irish in the classroom), it's just not us, like, we .. the ability is not enough ... it's just a lack of confidence" (15:24)

"It would be good if there was actually classes in fourth year for the likes of Oral Irish and stuff, knowin' that you have two good years ahead, like" (16:09)

"Lookin' back now, you'd definitely do more classes if you were in fourth year, or fifth year, or if you got a chance to do sixth year again, just buckle down more, but, like, realistically people in fourth year aren't really going' to take it seriously because they don't know what it's like being in sixth year, this close to the Leavin' Cert, like" (16:41)

"Say, for a month in fourth year, like, everything is in Irish, or something like that ... like, they take a month out of fourth year and they make you speak Irish in every class" (17:38)

"Extend Seachtain na Gaeilge for a month in fourth year" (17:52)

"In fourth year, they're not even concerned about the Leavin', I don't think until you get into Leavin' Cert that you actually start worryin' about it" (18:08)

"Or even for fourth year, you're not goin' to be doin' writin', so even if you were just talkin' durin' the class in Irish, it might even just help a bit, it'd be more relaxin'" (18:20)

Irish-medium college:

"Do more natural speaking in class, I think ... when you want to learn any language, it is better to speak the language" (14:00)

"Most of the time, we are still writing" (14:25)

"People at the beginning of fifth year don't think about the 40%, and that is a big, huge number" (14:38)

"There are different things that can be done, changing your Facebook page to Irish helps greatly" (15:05)

"Just do the conversation perfectly cos I know people in other schools around the area and, like, they don't sound natural, they're like robots, y'know, repeating things that are, like, they don't know what they are saying" (15:23)

"Keep it interesting too, if you are able to direct the conversation yourself, like, we don't want to talk about social problems, like, sometimes and they say "oh, do you watch television", maybe if the conversation was focused on more topical things like around the world and everything, it would be better, things that interest you ..." (15:51)

"Everything is exactly the same as the other languages you are doing for the Leaving Cert, like, for the most part the conversation is the same as French or German, y'know" (16: 19)

"Interesting subject matter, like sport or something ... something different from your family, your school, your area" (16:46)

"Bring in a document or photo so that we have to describe a document or picture, do that in Irish because it would be topical" (16:49)

"If there was, like, a report to read and talk about" (17:10)

Gaeltacht school:

"Start preparing the Picture Sequences from the beginning, from the beginning of fourth year" (9:16)

"We did half of them in fourth year and the other half this year" (9:30)

"Learn vocabulary, like "ar muin na muice"/"on the pig's back" ... because it is strong and rich ... (10:19)

"Richness of expression, if there is plenty of richness they will see the standard of Irish we have, they will give us more marks" (11:44)

"Learn expressions that we don't usually use ... for instance 'ina shuí ar a sháimhín só', 'saol lucht an rachmais' / 'sitting at ease', 'the life of the rich' (instead of 'saol an mhada bháin' / 'the life of Riley') ..." (12:06)

"Always speak Irish at home ..." (13:00)

"My parents don't have Irish but I speak Irish to my brothers and sisters" (13:20)

Appendix 10

Student voice: did the Oral Examination give you an opportunity to demonstrate your speaking skills?

English-medium school:

"No, not for the amount of work you put in ... cos half of it is stuff you learned off rather than your actual ability" (19:35)

"A lot of stuff you did prepare for didn't really come up ... so I knew a lot more than I was asked ... what I mean is, say I, I dunno, like, say 100% of my Irish, I was only asked, like, 40%, the questions he asked me weren't all that I knew, like, I knew a lot more ... it's just the questions he didn't ask me" (19:53)

"Like, I think that for the amount of marks goin' for the conversation, like 120 marks, I think like anybody could get that 120 marks, like, you know what I mean, if they got every word right" (20:29)

"No, not really, I got real panicked ... cos I just got so panicked and I was stutterin' and I was so nervous, like ... you should just get time to relax or somethin' ... like even have a little conversation before he even starts recordin'" (20:58)

"I was even panickin' when he was askin' me the simple questions ... you were straight in and he was recordin'" (21:38)

"I feel, like, at the moment they expect you to hit the ground runnin', with the amount of questions that you get asked at the start" (22:01)

"It's not that it's too short, it's what was put in, like the Picture Sequence, we'll just say if you were goin' down to Connemara and you're thinkin' about talkin' Irish, you won't think about the Picture Sequence, you'll think about the conversation part ... cos like afterwards, you're never, ever going' to use it (the Irish in the Picture Sequences) again, even if you go to Connemara" (22:44)

"Cos it's just too much to learn and it's too hard to even learn them (Picture Sequences) in detail, like" (23:24)

"You're more prepared for it, you have a little bit of control over what happens (the conversation) where you're hopin' for a few of the Picture Sequences to come up that you feel you'll do good in ... you'd use the conversation again, like I'd rather spend more time on the conversation, like use the time for the Picture Sequences, you don't use the Picture Sequences at all" (23:39)

"It's more specialised Irish, I feel, in the Picture Sequences than there is in ... like there was one about global warmin', I mean ... like that's not for Ordinary level standard at all, like I think that's ridiculous" (24:03)

"The Oral examiner didn't know who was Ordinary and who was Higher level and that wasn't really fair" (24:29)

"Like say I was doin' alright from the start, he's goin' to start askin' me harder questions that I don't really know because I'm not in Higher but he just thinks I'm in Higher because I'm doin' alright, just because I did alright with the first few that I prepared for well, he'll probably think I'm in Higher Level then, then he'll start askin' me harder questions that I haven't a clue about and then I'll lose marks" (24:37)

"You're marked harder cos he thinks you're in Higher" (25:06)

"They know if they're Foundation but I think they should know if you're Higher or Ordinary" (25:28)

Irish-medium college

"It didn't ... I got *Géibheann* in the Oral and, like, I don't have the opportunity to use my good Irish with things like *Géibheann*, it's too simple but then, like, conversely, there are things like *An Spailpín Fánach* too which is very hard" (18:24)

"In the Picture Sequences, though, there is a big difference between the easy ones and economic crisis" (19:01)

"Unseen, I think it's very important that they are unseen" (19:29)

"Every Picture Sequence on the same level but if they were unseen but, like, say, on an easy enough level but there was no time to prepare it" (19:48)

"There were a lot of other things I could comment on but the examiner didn't ask me, like, your family, your area, you talk about that in fifth class, in third class" (20:13)

"That helps (the unseen feature of the Picture Sequences) other schools and people who don't have natural Irish or fluent Irish, to achieve A's but it's not fair on us, like we speak Irish every single day and we have Irish and they are learning off, like, paragraph by paragraph, and they are able to get an A1" (20:33)

"You can write out the phonetics for each word in that poem and have it in the test" (21:10)

"And in the Picture Sequences, you can learn each one off by heart and people learn that, that's not right" (21:18)

"Make them unseen in the Irish-medium colleges and in the Gaeltacht schools ... twenty five extra points for us if we're doing an extra level than any other person, the way it is in Maths. The Irish we're doing now, it's not L1 Irish, it is L2 Irish, so why are we learning basic things" (22:20)

"Everyone is always talking about the same subject ... nobody has different answers" (22:46)

"We get into it and it's finished ... two or three extra minutes ..." (23:07)

"I don't agree because it puts a lot of pressure on people to learn more ... I was looking forward to the end" (23:14)

Gaeltacht school

"The time was fairly short for the general conversation" (14:48)

"By the time you go through the poems and the Picture Sequences, you don't have much time left for a good conversation" (15:03)

"about recreation and about the area and about the economic recession and the way it is around this area and about the government ... but more time would be better, a few extra minutes" (15:57)

"politics, what I want to do ... I felt it was a bit short" (16:54)

"Another three minutes for the conversation" (17:20)

Appendix 11

Student voice: what two recommendations would you have to improve the Oral Examination?

English-medium school

"Definitely get rid of most of the Picture Sequences ... have 10, maybe 15 or so for the Higher Level, if they eventually say, right, well, we know they're Ordinary, they're Higher" (25:44)

"Is it realistic that they'll get rid of Picture Sequences ... they'll never just completely scrap them, they might gradually get rid of them" (26:28)

(Is there any value in keeping the Picture Sequence?) "No" (resounding answer) (26:46)

"Just make the conversation a bit harder then" (27:01)

"Break the Oral into 4 different sections over the 2 years ... say, like, do conversation, and then, like, later on do a poem .. like continuous assessment so then it's not lost throughout the year and we're not just stuck with it at the end of the year, with everything piled in on top of each other" (27:08)

"It would keep ya workin', cos ya feel like ya need to work for it" (27:54)

"You'd be more relaxed with your teacher" (28:15) (teacher-assessment)

"But it would be more biased" (28:17)

"Maybe another Irish teacher in the school" (28:22)

"Or even if it was recorded with the teacher, you could relax with the teacher" (28:33)

"Or even if it wasn't possible to have your teacher there on their own, have your teacher and an Examiner" (28:51)

"Maybe they could record it and then send it off" (28:59)

"That's ok, I like that, at least it shows you can read Irish ... if you feel like it went well, like it'll keep you going' and you'll start pronouncing other words better" (29:34) (poetry reading)

"It could be just even a question at the end, like 'would you like to add anything else" (30:23)

Irish-medium college

"Make the Picture Sequence and poems unseen" (23:56)

"Maybe get rid of the poems and instead introduce a passage and discuss it ... when you read the poem you have to show that you understand the poem but you can still, just, learn how to read it and instead of this if you introduce a passage and then discuss the passage with the examiner for two minutes" (23:59)

"You don't show your skills reading the poems" (25:03)

"If they (the poems) are unseen, you show your skills ..." (25:29)

"For example, you can see the word 'tá' and write beside it 't-a-w-h' and you have it and people in other schools can do this for the entire poem, this is not prohibited" (25:38)

"Emphasise natural Irish" (26:05)

"A picture or something that you can talk about ... based on a topic like sport, music, TV" (26:16)

"The idea behind the poem is still there with the passage ... discuss the passage, leave it open for natural conversation instead, d'ya Know, 'what do you think'" (26:58)

"The welcome is okay .. it doesn't take up a lot of time" (27:36)

Gaeltacht school

"Before we enter the Oral, we're sort of worried that this person won't be from Ulster and maybe we won't understand the Irish of the person questioning us ... that he's from Cork or Galway" (18: 12)

"they have difficulties with our dialect" (18:40)

"Less Picture Sequences ... ten ... twenty is too many" (19:07)

"Too much pressure in the exam" (19:43) (keep the pictures seen in advance)

"when you are nervous going into the exam ... it's hard to think what you want to say" (22:50) (keep the pictures seen in advance)

"you want to show your Irish standards and you will not be able to do that if you are nervous" (23:27)

"maybe a document instead of the Picture Sequences ... pastimes or something you're interested in that you can talk about" (26:54)

Appendix 12

Student voice: did the Oral Examination give you with any additional skills – lifelong skills?

English-medium school

"No, because I don't think we're going to need to use it again, like it's not really used that much throughout the country, unless you go to country places or whatever, like it's not really used that much in Dublin" (31:17)

"It makes me feel more confident in it, but I feel like I'm never going to use it again" (31:35)

"like, after the Leaving Cert, I'll probably like forget everything I did learn, because I'm never going to use it again" (31:40)

"there's not many jobs that would use Irish, I don't think" (31:58)

"I feel like the Oral gave me more confidence for going into French the following week because we were all so nervous" (32:17)

"it gave me skills ... confidence that I'd do alright in the actual written test because for the last few weeks like I learned off like verbs and just phrases and whatever that I'd be able to use in the Essays or whatever or blog" (32:44)

"Irish itself, I don't think there's anything ... but going in there and sitting and talking was a help" (33:13)

Irish-medium college

"No ... because ... we have Irish already" (28:25)

"It gave us richer phrases" (28:43)

"Honestly, (the Oral Examination) didn't (give us additional skills) ... in the long term" (29:11)

"It doesn't help with Irish" (29:28)

"there's nothing special about it" (29:30)

"it develops Irish a wee bit ... for people in English-medium schools" (29:45)

"apart from the people who are going to be living in the Gaeltacht or like be Irish teachers, it makes no sense for anyone really cos you're not going to use it if you're going to be, y'know, an engineer or ..." (30:24)

"that's the thing, if you're not working with the Irish language there is a big chance that you will not use it" (30:50)

Gaeltacht school

"communication and interpersonal" (27:59)

"practice interviewing for a job" (28:13)

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