

A STUDY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF  
IRISH IN MAINSTREAM PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND IN  
GAELSCOILEANNA (IRISH MEDIUM PRIMARY SCHOOLS)

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**Abstract**

My EdD Work Based Project (WBP) focused on 'A Study of Student Experiences and Perceptions of Irish in Mainstream Primary Schools (M.P.S) and in *Gaelscoileanna (Gael.)* / (Irish Medium Primary Schools)'. This paper concentrates on trends which emerged from my study. The detailed commentary aims to provide the reader with a clear picture of what is actually occurring in Irish language classrooms, in sixth class, at primary school level, and in the wider learning environment, in the Republic of Ireland.

**Introduction**

In this paper a detailed discussion of my research methodology and research findings is provided. I will follow the outline of my questionnaire and will structure my discussion in a similar vein. The discussion will concentrate on student experiences and perceptions of Reading, Writing, then Speaking and finally Listening. The discussion will also focus on student experiences and perceptions in the wider context and I will present my

discussion under the headings of 'Learning,' 'Home' and 'Primary School'.

It should be noted that no significant differences emerged vis-à-vis responses from either boys or girls in either urban or rural Mainstream Primary Schools. Neither did different class sizes produce any significant differences. All *Gaelscoileanna* were urban based and here again no significant differences emerged from responses from either boys or girls in all such schools involved in my study. I present points of comparison between the Mainstream Primary Schools and *Gaelscoileanna* and I comment on such. Therefore, to facilitate presentation, I have grouped the statistical findings under two main headings - Mainstream Primary Schools i.e. (M.P.S.) and *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish Medium Primary Schools, *Gael.*), throughout.

### Methodology

I used mixed methods in my EdD research, where I chose two research instruments (questionnaires and group interviews) which focused on the four skills of language learning i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening. The wider learning environment was also addressed, i.e. the home and the primary school. My mixed methods approach was robust enough to meet the needs of reliability and validity.

In my study I focused on ten mainstream primary schools and ten Irish medium primary schools, to reflect students' experiences and perceptions of learning Irish.

Because I was dealing with a reasonably large number of primary school students of wide ranging abilities, it was best to use a self-administered questionnaire. In this way, each student had the opportunity to respond at ease and the whole experience was not overly daunting. This approach was also the most efficient as the group concerned could respond individually, and the questionnaires could be administered to a full class, or several classes, at once. The questions posed were designed to elicit

responses to the most pertinent aspects of the acquisition of Irish as a second language. My cohort sample, because of age, was judged "immature", and I realised that this would affect the whole business of articulating questionnaire items, and particularly forms of controlled response, so as to ensure that each item would be understood by the respondent and so that each respondent's reply might be reliably interpreted.

I had a number of sub-sections in my questionnaire, which looked at Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, Learning, Home and Primary School. The questionnaire, with a total of 53 questions, was written in English and students had a total of 45 minutes to complete it.

I used group interviews as a minor research tool. The group interviews were conducted between January and March 2006. The group interview schedule contained the same subsections as my questionnaire, with a total of 14 questions. The group interviews were conducted in English; each of the twenty sessions lasted one hour and involved ten students. All schools that were part of my questionnaire work were also part of the group interview sessions.

I was provided with lists of mainstream primary schools and *Gaelscoileanna*, from The Kildare Education Centre, Kildare, Ireland. I chose a random sample of schools that reflected the larger group - ten Mainstream Primary Schools and ten *Gaelscoileanna*.

I considered the following variables when choosing my random sampling: -Gender, size, urban / rural location of Mainstream Primary Schools only. Irish medium primary schools (*Gaelscoileanna*) are predominantly located in urban areas in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, all *Gaelscoileanna* chosen were urban. The schools were located within the three provinces: in Munster, I selected three Mainstream Primary Schools (two urban and one rural), and three *Gaelscoileanna*; in Leinster, three Mainstream Primary Schools (one urban and two rural) and three

*Gaelscoileanna*; and in Connaught, four Mainstream Primary Schools (two urban and two rural) and four *Gaelscoileanna*. Due to ethical / confidentiality issues, I am unable to name schools or give their actual locations because I gave a guarantee to all schools involved that their identity would not be made know at any stage.

I wrote to the following personnel in each school prior to commencing my fieldwork: The Principal, The Board of Management, The Sixth Class Teacher. I also sent a letter to each school for the parents of sixth class students, seeking and obtaining their written permission to include their children in my research. A total of 500 students (250 students from each type of school) responded to the questionnaire survey while 200 students (100 students from each type of school) were involved in the group interview sessions. Students completed the questionnaire between January and March 2006, during class time. Due to the large class sizes in each school, I decided on a cut off point and I chose 25 students from each senior primary class in each school. I chose exactly the same number of boys and girls from mainstream primary schools and from *Gaelscoileanna* to respond to my questionnaire. I conducted group interviews with 100 students from mainstream primary schools and another 100 in all *Gaelscoileanna*. Each group interview consisted of ten pupils chosen so as to represent the ability range of the class in each school.

I would like to stress that the two hundred students who were involved in the group interview sessions from the various schools also completed a questionnaire for me.

Reading

Figure 1: Do you think Irish reading is...? (Questionnaire Responses to Question 1)

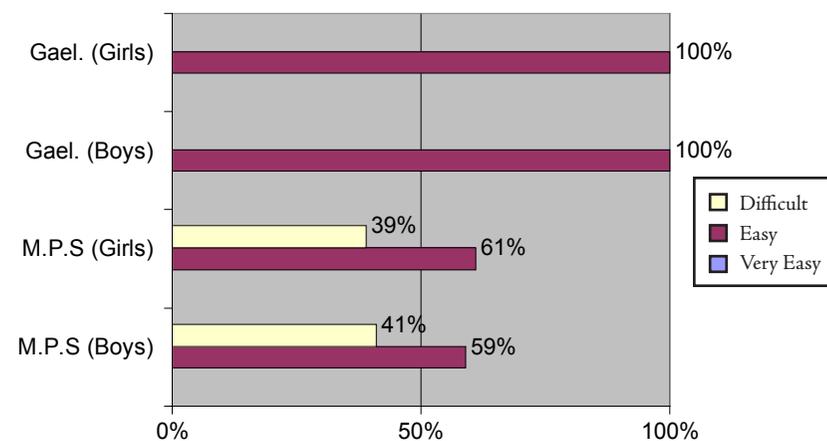


Figure 2: What did you think of Irish reading in Primary School? (Group Interview Responses to Question 1)

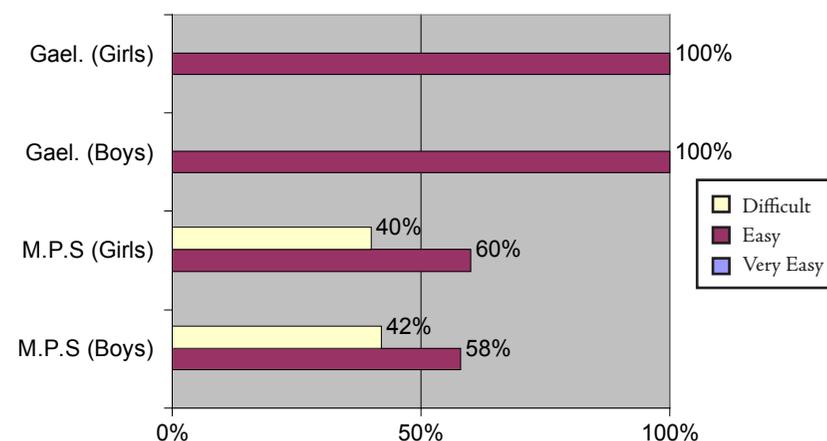


Table 1: Questionnaire Responses in relation to Irish reading (Question 8), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 8. Which one of the following statements applies to you? (please circle <u>one</u> number) | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at Irish reading   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at Irish reading  | 59%           | 61%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at Irish reading  | 17%           | 18%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at Irish reading   | 24%           | 21%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at Irish reading  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

Table 2: Group Interview Responses in relation to Irish reading (Question 2), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 2. In relation to Irish Reading, which one of the following statements applies to you? <u>Explain</u> your answer. | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at Irish reading   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at Irish reading  | 58%           | 60%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at Irish reading  | 16%           | 18%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at Irish reading   | 26%           | 22%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at Irish reading  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

While the majority of students believe they are acquiring the skill of Irish reading in a satisfactory manner, it would also seem that negative feedback has eroded the confidence of a significant group of weaker students. This appears to have resulted in these students underachieving in the Irish reading class. Similar messages emerged from the group interview sessions. The Irish reading class should cater for all ability levels and ensure that the weaker student just like the more able student should experience success. Hayhoe and Parker (1990, p. viii), in the preface to their book, believe that it is vital for all students to be 'actively engaged' in reading in the classroom, irrespective of ability, a position with which I fully agree.

Gregory (1996, p. 175) emphasises the fact that teachers and parents must work together to ensure that the child is given every assistance when seeking to become a competent reader in a second language. Alas, my findings reveal that parents do not use Irish at home and it is highly unlikely that parents are going to change this behavior in the foreseeable future.

Writing

Figure 3: Do you think Irish writing is...? (Questionnaire Responses to Question 9)

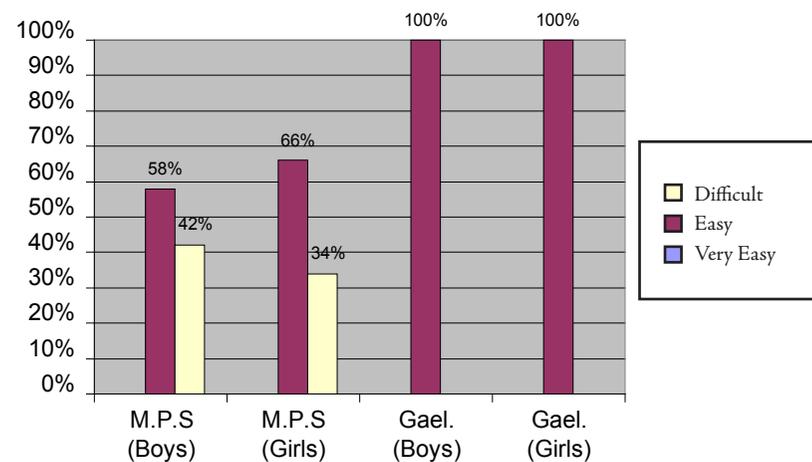


Figure 4: What did you think of Irish writing in Primary School?  
(Group Interview Responses to Question 3)

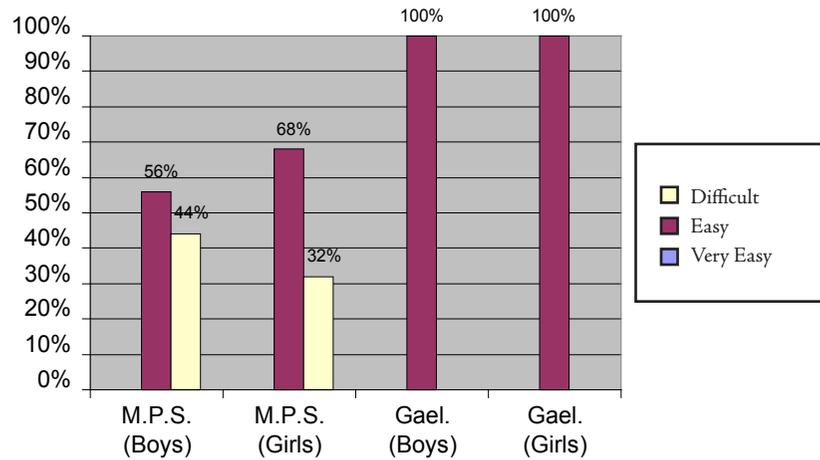


Table 3: Questionnaire Responses in relation to Irish writing (Question 15),  
from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna  
Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 15. Which one of the following statements applies to you?<br>(please circle <u>one</u> number) | M.P.S.<br>(B)<br>(%) | M.P.S.<br>(G)<br>(%) | Gael.<br>(B)<br>(%) | Gael.<br>(G)<br>(%) |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1) I am very good at Irish writing   | 0%                   | 0%                   | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 2) I am good at Irish writing  | 58%                  | 66%                  | 100%                | 100%                |
| 3) I am fair at Irish writing  | 12%                  | 14%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 4) I am bad at Irish writing   | 30%                  | 20%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 5) I am very bad at Irish writing  | 0%                   | 0%                   | 0%                  | 0%                  |

Table 4: Group Interview Responses in relation to Irish writing  
(Question 4), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 4. In relation to Irish Writing, which one of the following statements applies to you? <u>Explain</u> your answer. | M.P.S.<br>(B)<br>(%) | M.P.S.<br>(G)<br>(%) | Gael.<br>(B)<br>(%) | Gael.<br>(G)<br>(%) |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1) I am very good at Irish Writing   | 0%                   | 0%                   | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 2) I am good at Irish Writing  | 56%                  | 68%                  | 100%                | 100%                |
| 3) I am fair at Irish Writing  | 24%                  | 18%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 4) I am bad at Irish Writing   | 10%                  | 7%                   | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 5) I am very bad at Irish Writing  | 0%                   | 0%                   | 0%                  | 0%                  |

It emerged in this study that the majority of students believe they are succeeding regarding Irish language writing. Fletcher (1993, p. 18) emphasises the fact that the skill of writing is acquired over time, while Baker (1995, pp. 124-125) believes that all students learning a second language should be capable of acquiring the skill of writing effectively. However, it is clear that a significant minority group of students in Mainstream Primary Schools believe they are not mastering the skill of Irish writing effectively in the classroom.

Speaking

Figure 5: Do you think speaking in Irish is...? (Questionnaire Responses to Question 16)

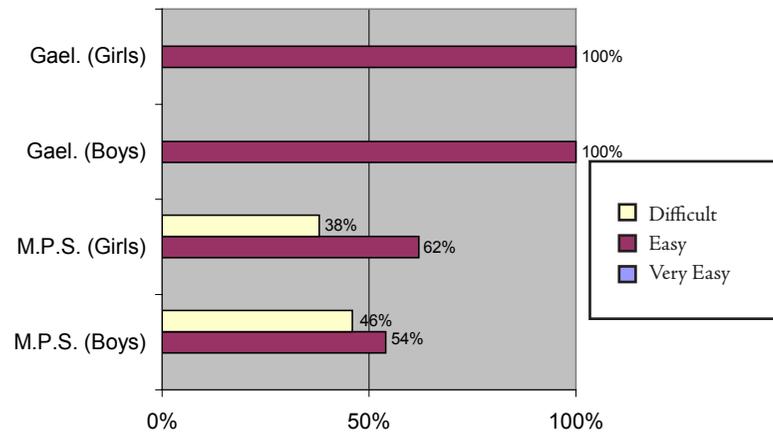


Figure 6: What did you think of speaking in Irish in primary school? (Group Interview Responses to Question (5), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna)

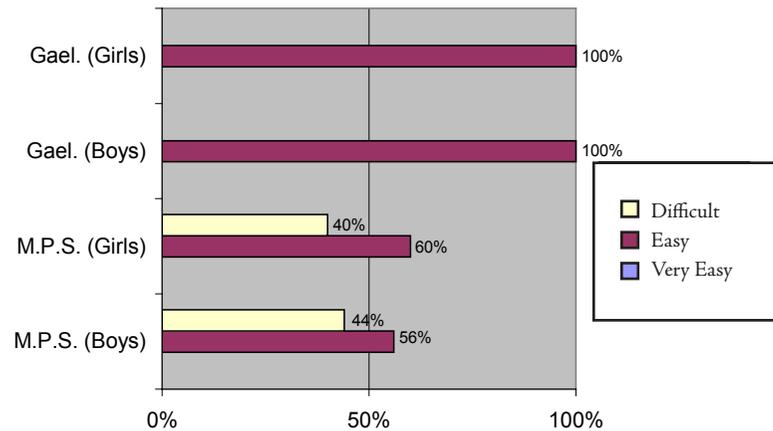


Table 5: Questionnaire Responses in relation to spoken Irish (Question 21), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna: Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 21. Which one of the following statements applies to you? (please circle <u>one</u> number) | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at speaking in Irish  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at speaking in Irish   | 54%           | 63%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at speaking in Irish   | 13%           | 9%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at speaking in Irish  | 33%           | 28%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at speaking in Irish   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

Table 6: Group Interview Responses in relation to spoken Irish (Question 6), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna: Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 6. In relation to speaking in Irish, which one of the following statements applies to you? Explain your answer. | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at speaking in Irish  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at speaking in Irish   | 56%           | 60%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at speaking in Irish   | 12%           | 10%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at speaking in Irish  | 32%           | 30%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at speaking in Irish   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

Dawes and Birrell (2000, p.73) emphasise the fact that the skill of speaking is acquired over time. They feel that it is vital for all students to enjoy and benefit from speaking the target language if they are to acquire it effectively. The majority of students involved in my WBP appear to have a genuine interest in speaking Irish in primary school.

Furthermore, Van Lier (1996, p. 48) stresses the fact that each and every second language learner should be given every opportunity to converse in the target language. In my study, students who were given real opportunities to speak Irish in class appear to have become competent speakers of the language. Overtime, Van Lier feels that this will result in

the student becoming competent in the language.

A significant minority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools feel they are either 'fair' or 'bad' at speaking Irish. This is certainly a cause for concern. Mitchell (1994, p. 110) in his chapter on 'Getting Pupils Talking' stresses the importance of getting all pupils to talk in the language classroom. He feels that students have a greater chance of becoming competent speakers if they are given opportunities to express themselves in the target language.

Listening

Figure 7: Do you think that listening to tapes in Irish is? (Questionnaire Responses to Question 22)

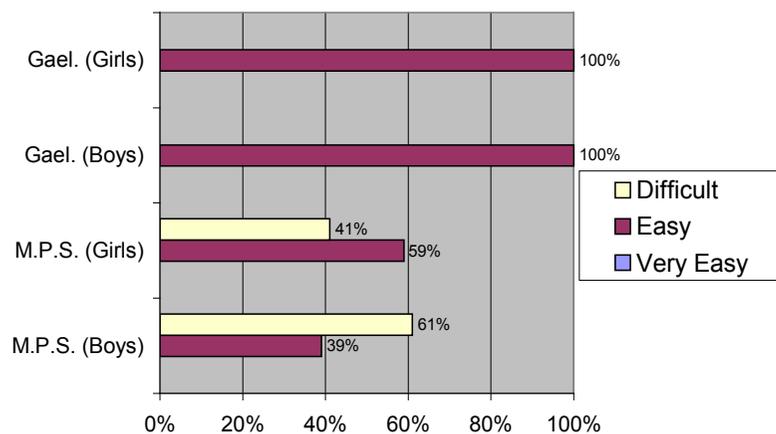


Figure 8: What did you think of listening to Irish in primary school? (Group Interview Responses to Question (7), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna):

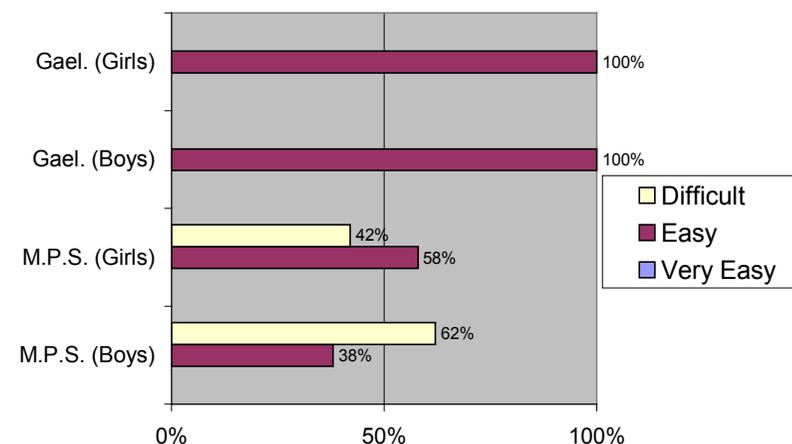


Table 7: Questionnaire Responses in relation to listening to Irish (Question 27), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 27. Which one of the following statements applies to you? (please circle <u>one</u> number) | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at listening to Irish   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at listening to Irish  | 39%           | 59%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at listening to Irish  | 17%           | 9%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at listening to Irish   | 44%           | 32%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at listening to Irish  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

Table 8: Group Interview Responses in relation to listening to Irish (Question 8), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 8. In relation to listening to Irish, which one of the following statements applies to you? <u>Explain</u> your answer. | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at listening to Irish   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at listening to Irish  | 38%           | 58%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at listening to Irish  | 16%           | 10%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at listening to Irish   | 46%           | 32%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at listening to Irish  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

White (1998, p.13) emphasises the fact that it is essential for all language learners to become good listeners in the language classroom. Only a minority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* have become competent listeners in the Irish language class in primary school.

The majority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools feel they are either 'fair' or 'bad' at listening to Irish. Riddell (2001, pp. 115-116) encourages all language teachers to spend time teaching the skill of listening. Riddell accepts that acquiring the skill of listening can be difficult. However, he does feel it is incumbent on all language teachers to ensure that their students will successfully acquire the skill over time.

Learning

Figure 9: Do you think that learning Irish is? (Questionnaire Responses to Question 28)

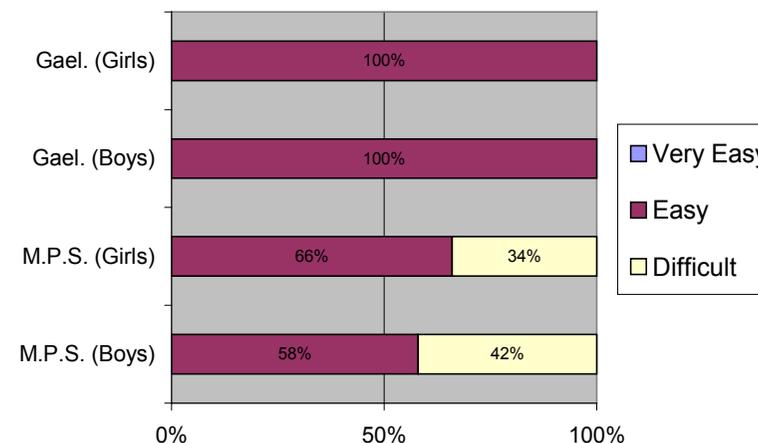
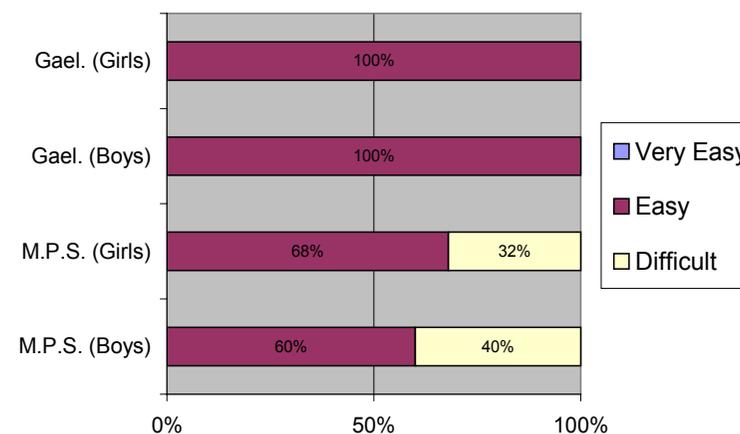


Figure 10: What did you think of learning Irish in primary school? (Group Interview Responses from Mainstream Primary Schools and *Gaelscoileanna* to Question (9))



My findings indicated that a significant minority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools find learning Irish ‘Difficult’. Overall, these students also appear to be quite disillusioned with learning Irish.

It emerged from the questionnaire findings that 52% of boys and 62% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* find Irish grammar exercises ‘Easy’ in primary schools. However, a significant minority group of students (48% of boys and 38% of girls) in Mainstream Primary Schools declared that they find Irish grammar exercises ‘Difficult’ in primary school. Many of these refer to negative learning experiences. For example, 12% of boys and 10% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools indicated that they never get good comments from their teacher when they are completing Irish grammar work in the classroom; compare Cook (2001, p. 149) who recommends that

“An important element in L2 success appears to be how learners are treated: the teaching method they encounter, the language they hear, and the environment in which they are learning.”

The research findings reveal that all students in Mainstream Primary Schools have never been to the *Gaeltacht*. A different trend emerged in *Gaelscoileanna* where all students indicated that they have been to the *Gaeltacht* ‘A few times’. Overall, it is possible to deduce from these stark findings that it is now incumbent on all practitioners in Mainstream Primary Schools to ensure that their students are given the chance to attend Irish language courses in the *Gaeltacht*.

David and Yvonne Freeman (2001 p.284) would also reiterate the importance of linking the world of the second language classroom with the wider learning environment.

Cummins (1998, p. 12) also stresses the importance of all student language learners being immersed in the target language when seeking to become competent and confident in the new language. However, it was

apparent from my research that only students from *Gaelscoileanna* are spending time in the *Gaeltacht*. Critics may feel that the *Gaeltacht* does not offer immersion in the target language. I strongly refute such a claim.

Table 9: Questionnaire Responses in relation to learning Irish (Question (38), from Mainstream Primary Schools and in *Gaelscoileanna*:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 38. Which one of the following statements applies to you?<br>(please circle <u>one</u> number) | M.P.S<br>(B)<br>(%) | M.P.S<br>(G)<br>(%) | Gael.<br>(B)<br>(%) | Gael.<br>(G)<br>(%) |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1) I am very good at learning Irish  | 0%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  |
| 2) I am good at learning Irish   | 58%                 | 66%                 | 100%                | 62%                 |
| 3) I am fair at learning Irish   | 20%                 | 16%                 | 0%                  | 18%                 |
| 4) I am bad at learning Irish  | 22%                 | 18%                 | 0%                  | 20%                 |
| 5) I am very bad at learning Irish   | 0%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  | 0%                  |

Table 10: Group Interview Responses in relation to learning Irish (Question (10), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna:

Which one of the following statements applies to you?

| 10. In relation to learning Irish, which one of the following statements applies to you? <u>Explain</u> your answer. | M.P.S (B) (%) | M.P.S (G) (%) | Gael. (B) (%) | Gael. (G) (%) |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1) I am very good at learning Irish  | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |
| 2) I am good at learning Irish   | 60%           | 68%           | 100%          | 100%          |
| 3) I am fair at learning Irish   | 20%           | 16%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 4) I am bad at learning Irish  | 20%           | 16%           | 0%            | 0%            |
| 5) I am very bad at learning Irish   | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            | 0%            |

The research findings highlight the fact that the majority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* feel that they are ‘good’ at learning Irish. However, a significant minority of boys and girls in Mainstream Primary Schools indicated that they are either ‘fair’ or ‘bad’ at learning Irish (see table 9 and table 10).

I realise that the vast majority of teachers at primary level teach Irish in a mixed ability situation. Brown (2000, p. 26), focussing on second language teaching and learning, feels that language teachers ‘succeed’ with their students when they ‘give optimal attention to linguistic goals’ and ‘to the personhood of their students’, advice which teachers would do well to heed. This seems not to have happened in the case of a minority group of students, who appear to be struggling when it comes to learning Irish in the classroom.

Home

Figure 11: Do you speak in Irish at home? (Questionnaire Responses to Question 39)

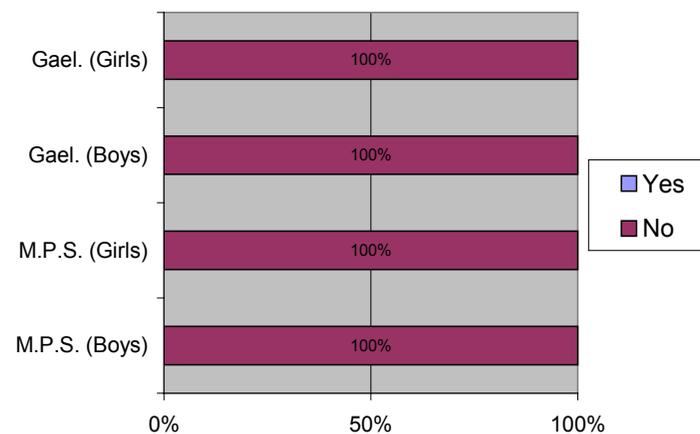
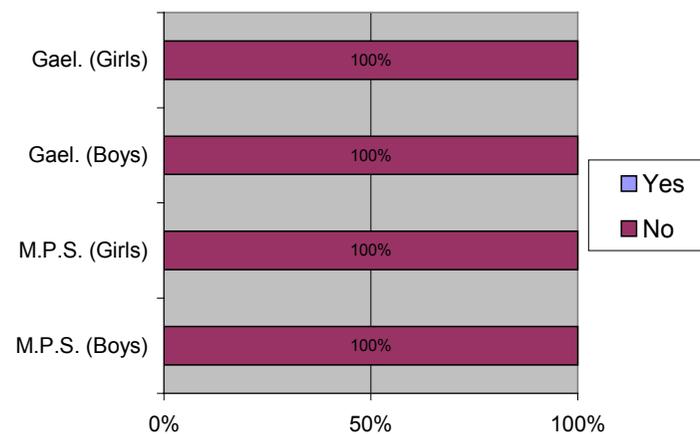


Figure 12: Do you speak in Irish at home? (Group Interview responses to Question (12), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna)



A very surprising statistic emerged here. One may have expected that a large number of boys and girls in Mainstream Primary Schools would not speak Irish at home but the final figure was 100% (Figure 11). It was even more astonishing to establish a similar trend in *Gaelscoileanna* (Figure 11). It was revealed that all boys and girls, again a full 100%, in *Gaelscoileanna* do not speak in Irish at home. One might have expected that special efforts to communicate through the medium of Irish would have been made in the homes of those students attending *Gaelscoileanna*.

A similar trend emerged from the group interview responses. All boys and girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and in *Gaelscoileanna* indicated that they do not speak in Irish at home (Figure 12). Selected responses from students who took part in the group interviews indicate why they do not speak Irish at home:

Boy: I do not speak Irish at home because my family cannot speak it to me (M.P.S (6)).

Girl: There is nobody in my home who will even try to speak Irish (*Gael.* (1)).

Boy: We speak English at home because my parents do not want to speak Irish around the house (M.P.S (9)).

The questionnaire findings reveal that all students in both Mainstream Primary Schools and *Gaelscoileanna* do not speak in Irish at home. A similar trend emerged from the group interviews where all students gave a similar response. The majority of students (64% of boys and 68% of girls) in Mainstream Primary Schools and 58% of boys and 64% of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* who took part in the group interview sessions indicated that they do not speak Irish at home because their families do not speak Irish to them, nor do they even encourage the students to speak Irish at home. These students felt that if their families tried to use the Irish they knew, this could encourage them (the students) to speak Irish at home.

The literature recommends that parents must play their part by using whatever Irish they possess with their child. In this way, Irish will be seen as a living language outside the classroom. Cook (2001, p. 217) provides all parents whose children are studying Irish as a second language with sound advice by stating: "Language is for forming relationships with people and for interrelating with them. Using language means meeting people and talking to them. The aim is to give the students the ability to engage in conversation with people."

A minority of students (20% of boys and 28% of girls) in Mainstream Primary Schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* gave such a response. The findings showed that 48% of boys and 63% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and 47% of boys and 50% of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* feel that their families could try to speak whatever Irish they possess.

It was also revealed that Irish is not perceived as important at home, for students in both the Mainstream Primary Schools and the *Gaelscoileanna*. The majority of students in both types of school revealed that Irish is not important for them, because their families speak only English to them. Selected verbatim quotations from students who responded to the questionnaire reveal why Irish is not important at home:

Boy: Anyone I know does not talk Irish (M.P.S (10)).

Girl: Irish is not needed at my home because nobody in my house speaks it. At school, it is important (*Gael.* (3)).

Girl: Irish is not important for me at home because I am not at school! (M.P.S (2))

Therefore, the questionnaire findings suggest that parents must make a greater effort to speak Irish to their child at home. David and Yvonne Freeman (2001, p. 269) advise all parents of children who are seeking to become competent and confident in a second language:

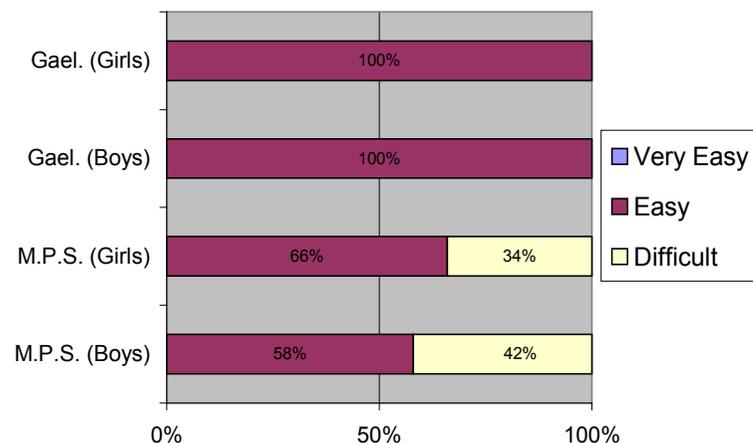
Parent involvement fosters a positive relationship between the

community and the school and helps create a supportive societal context for the schooling of students who move between two worlds. The societal context strongly influences the educational context, so teachers and other school personnel must work to develop a supportive societal context.

Scovel (2001, p.15) again reiterates the fact that second language learners must be able to speak the language in society if they are to become competent users of the language outside of the school. The same applies to Irish language students.

Primary School

Figure 13: How did you find Irish in Primary School? (Questionnaire Responses to (Question (49), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna)



Leaver, Ehrman and Shekhtman (2005, p. 107) stress the significance of relationships in the second language classroom when they state that: “Many good teachers know this, and they use the relationships they build with students to help them learn. You can use it in the reverse direction: you get an additional benefit from your relationships to help you learn.”

The questionnaire findings indicated that a significant minority group of students (42% of boys and 34% of girls) in Mainstream Primary Schools found Irish ‘Difficult’.

Harris and Murtagh (1999) provide guidance for all Irish language teachers at primary level when he declares:

Creating opportunities for young people to influence the evolution of the language is an important enterprise in its own right, of course, since it is young people who bring vitality and change to any language... In structural-linguistic or language-practice based approaches, or where the emphasis is on narrative texts, the realities of using the language for real communication may never be confronted and so sociolinguistic issues can be more easily obscured or ignored (p. 340).

Lynch (1996 p.6) emphasises the fact that all language teachers must have realistic expectations in the second language classroom, stressing that interaction must occur between the teacher and the language learner if the latter is to have a realistic chance of successfully acquiring the second language.

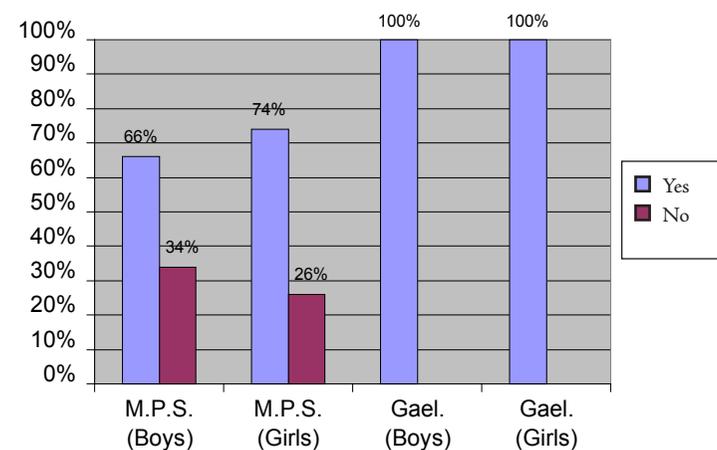
The questionnaire findings for those students who found Irish ‘Difficult’ contrast with the thinking of Harris and Murtagh above, as it would appear from the student responses that they experienced little or no success at acquiring Irish in primary school. It emerged from the questionnaire findings that 10% of boys and 9% of girls indicated that they always received negative comments from their teachers. Therefore, it is unlikely that these students will ever bring ‘vitality’ and ‘change’ to the Irish language

programme, which Harris and Murtagh feel is vital if Irish is to ‘evolve’ as a living language for each and every student in primary school classrooms.

The questionnaire findings showed that 8% of boys and 10% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and a staggering 72% of boys and 83% of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* enjoyed speaking Irish the most in primary school. The literature would suggest that all students should enjoy speaking Irish in the language classroom. However, this is apparently not happening. Gilsenan (2004, p. 3) stresses the importance of enjoyment when a student is seeking to become a competent speaker of Irish. I feel that all Irish language teachers should reflect on the gentle reminders which Gilsenan issues to all primary school teachers, stating (2004, p. 3) that:

The Irish language has caused heartache to many over the years. We all spent years learning reams of verbs and vocabulary only to realise that we couldn’t hold a simple conversation. This problem has been recognised and the revised curriculum now places huge emphasis on the use of Irish for communication. The main aim is to give each child the skills to allow them to hold conversations in Irish and to understand spoken Irish ...The department recommends that Irish is taught *through* Irish and this is a proven methodology.

Figure 14: Do you think it was important for you to study Irish in your Primary School? (Questionnaire Responses to (Question (52), from students in Mainstream Primary Schools and in *Gaelscoileanna*)

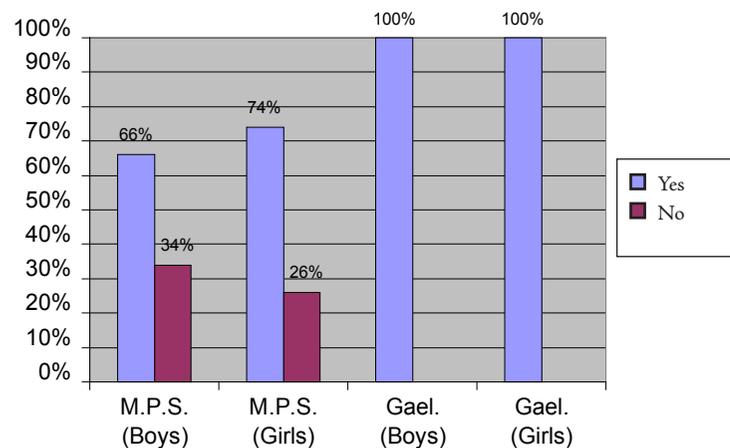


The questionnaire findings reveal that the majority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* felt that it was important for them to study Irish in Primary School (Figure 14).

However, a significant minority group of students in Mainstream Primary School felt that this was not important (Figure 14).

The comments which students made in relation to studying Irish in Primary School were varied.

Figure 15: Do you think it was important for you to study Irish in your Primary School? (Group Interview responses to (Question (13), from Mainstream Primary Schools and Gaelscoileanna )



A similar trend emerged from the group interview responses. The majority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* again felt that it was important to study Irish in primary school. However, a significant minority group of students in Mainstream Primary Schools again revealed that it was not important (Figure 15).

The majority of students (66% of boys and 74% of girls) in Mainstream Primary schools and all students in *Gaelscoileanna* indicated that it was important for them to study Irish in Primary school. A similar trend emerged from the group interviews. The questionnaire responses showed that 34% of boys and 26% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and 66% of boys and 74% of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* believe that Irish is our native language. While the group interview responses illustrated the fact that 34% of boys and 26% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and 66% of boys and 74% of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* felt that they are now well

prepared to study Irish at higher level, in secondary school. These students appear to have a genuine interest in the language and they are now ready to immerse themselves in the higher level Irish syllabus, at second level.

However, the questionnaire findings also showed that a significant minority of students in Mainstream Primary Schools (34% of boys and 26% of girls) felt that it was not important for them to study Irish in primary school. A similar trend emerged from the group interviews. It is interesting to note that 26% of boys and 20% of girls who responded to the questionnaire felt that Irish should be optional in primary school, as they felt that the language was too difficult to learn. They obviously lack the motivation and drive to pursue higher level Irish at second level. As a result of their negative learning experiences of Irish language learning in primary school, they now seek to make Irish optional. This is certainly a cause for concern as they will be expected to study the language to Leaving Certificate level. The possibility is that they will carry this negativity with them as they go through secondary school. This situation will have to stop now, if practitioners are serious about moulding all students into competent second language learners in Irish language classrooms at primary level.

The majority of students who responded to the questionnaire made further comments about Irish in the primary school. This consisted of 74% of boys and 82% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and 100% of students in *Gaelscoileanna*. A similar trend emerged from the group interview sessions.

It would appear from the questionnaire responses that a significant percentage of students were very conscious of the fact that teachers ensured that students learned proper Irish each day in primary school. Twenty-four per cent of boys and twenty-nine per cent of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and fifty-two per cent of boys and fifty-eight per cent of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* gave such a response. The group interview responses

revealed that 33% of boys and 37% of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools and 44% of boys and 48% of girls in *Gaelscoileanna* believe that the Irish language is part of what we are in Ireland. The students indicated that they realise that they will have to play their part to ensure that Irish will remain a living language.

However, 11% of boys and 9% of girls who responded to the questionnaire from Mainstream Primary Schools indicated that they did not like Irish in primary school, because they always got bad comments from their primary school teachers. Twenty-two per cent of boys and fourteen per cent of girls in Mainstream Primary Schools who took part in the group interview sessions gave negative responses, in relation to Irish in primary school. Eleven per cent of boys and seven per cent of girls indicated that they will never again use Irish once they finish secondary school. A further 11% of boys and 7% of girls felt that Irish is not a nice language to learn because it is difficult and boring.

Ó Huallacháin (1994, pp. 143-144) felt that a revised curriculum for the teaching of Irish of Mainstream Primary Schools would result in students becoming more competent speakers of the language. It is evident from student commentary about Irish in primary school that the majority of students are progressing very well in the language class. However, there is also a significant minority of students who are underachieving and are disillusioned with Irish in Mainstream Primary Schools. Thus, despite the fact that the revised primary school curriculum was introduced into primary schools in 1999, there is still a cohort of weaker students who are not experiencing success in the classroom.

### Conclusions

In this paper I focused on a discussion of my main findings in relation to student experiences and perceptions of Irish in the classroom and

in the wider learning environment. I linked the discussion of the research findings with a selection of the research literature, pertinent to the current piece of research.

I concentrated on the four skills of Irish language learning, which all students who are seeking to acquire a second language such as Irish must be exposed to i.e. Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. The discussion of the research findings also focused on the wider learning environment, i.e. learning, home and the primary school.

The findings suggest that the vast majority of students believe they are acquiring Irish effectively in the classroom. However, a significant minority group of students in Mainstream Primary Schools are underachieving and are not enjoying or benefiting from formal instruction in the Irish language classroom. This is certainly a cause for concern in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

Gordon and Grant (1997: 5) stress that teachers should always listen to their students in the classroom: "The time has come to listen to what students have to say, to listen to how they are feeling. Are you sitting comfortably?"

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