3 Design of the study

3.1 Introduction

The first phase of the study was designed to collect general background data on attitudes to Irish, use of Irish and ability in Irish among a sample of Leaving Certificate (final year in secondary school) students, as well as providing baseline data on these same variables for a sub-sample of this initial group who participated in the follow-up or ‘attrition/retention’ study. In the first phase (Time 1), students were interviewed with regard to the learning of Irish in secondary school and their contact with Irish outside of school. In addition, their general proficiency and overall communicative proficiency in spoken Irish (listening and speaking) was assessed by means of specially designed language tests. The same set of tests was used in the follow-up study (Time 2) approximately twenty months later and some new background information was collected from the final sample of participants.

3.2 Selection procedures and samples

3.2.1 Instructional background of students

One aim of the present study was to assess achievement in Irish and changes in achievement over time across proficiency levels. It will be recalled (see section 1.7.2) that Irish can be studied as a subject at one of three levels in the Leaving Certificate Programme (Foundation, Ordinary and Higher Level). A simple way of ensuring a good representation of students by proficiency level would be to choose students from each of the three course levels. However, this was not considered appropriate because Foundation Level Irish course is substantially different from the other two courses in terms of content, covering a much narrower range of topics and functions than the ordinary and higher level courses. And it would impossible, therefore, to design a single curriculum-based assessment instrument suitable for students from the Foundation Level course in Irish and the other two course levels. This left two groups - Ordinary Level Irish students and Higher Level Irish students - who, as was pointed out in Chapter 1, share many course objectives in Irish. A small sub-group of Higher Level Irish students who would be perceived to have an advantage in terms of instructional background in Irish are those who attend ‘all-Irish’ (immersion) schools (see section 1.6). This latter group follow the same Irish course as higher level students in ‘ordinary’ (English-medium) schools but Irish is used as a teaching medium for all subjects (other than English). The term ‘Instructional Category’ (IC) is used in this study to distinguish between these three groups of Leaving Certificate students:

- Instructional Category 1 (IC1): Ordinary Level Irish in ‘ordinary’ schools,
- Instructional Category 2 (IC2): Higher Level Irish in ‘ordinary’ schools,
Retention and attrition of Irish as a second language

- Instructional Category 3 (IC3): Higher Level Irish in ‘all-Irish’ schools.

The selection process in the study aimed to get as representative a sample as possible of students from within each of these three instructional categories.

Despite the numerical ordering of the Instructional Categories it cannot be assumed that their proficiency in Irish follows the pattern IC3 > IC2 > IC1 or that the differences between categories are equivalent. Though, in general, it would be expected that Leaving Certificate students choosing Higher Level Irish would have higher proficiency in Irish than Ordinary Level Irish students, it cannot be assumed in all cases. Students who would be capable of studying Higher Level Irish may choose not to do so. For example, they may wish to devote more of their available study time to other subjects which they consider more important in terms of their future careers or third-level course choices. Furthermore, despite the evidence that primary school children attending ‘all-Irish’ schools have, on average, higher achievement in spoken Irish than their peers in ‘ordinary’ schools (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a) there is no conclusive evidence to support the existence of a similar pattern at secondary level. Thus, Instructional Category as defined in this study must be treated as a nominal rather than a ordinal variable or an interval variable (Ferguson, 1976).

3.2.2 The Initial Sample

Twelve Leaving Certificate classes with a total of 257 students were selected to participate in the study at Time 1 (Spring 2000). For practical reasons only schools in the Dublin area were included in the initial list of schools from which classes were to be selected. As well as trying to get a good selection of classes representing each of the above instructional categories, the final selection tried to ensure a good balance of classes in terms of school location, social class background of the school as well as gender composition of class. In the event, however, it proved more difficult to get Ordinary Level Irish classes to volunteer than Higher Level Irish classes. Data in the last row of Table 3.1 below show that there were more students in Instructional Category 2 than in Instructional Category 1 in the Initial Sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research instruments</th>
<th>IC1 Ordinary Level Irish in ‘ordinary’ school (n classes = 4)</th>
<th>IC2 Higher Level Irish in ‘ordinary’ school (n classes = 6)</th>
<th>IC3 Higher Level Irish in ‘all-Irish’ school (n classes = 2)</th>
<th>Initial Sample Students (N classes = 12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Questionnaire</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish C-Test (ICT)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPSI*: Listening Test</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPSI: Speaking Test**</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*TPSI=Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish

**Only students involved in follow-up study (i.e. Target Sample) were administered the Speaking Test.
It may be recalled from national Leaving Certificate statistics (see section 1.7.3) that female students were almost twice as likely as male students to take the Higher Level Irish paper in the Leaving Certificate Examination 2000. This imbalance is also reflected in the gender ratio in Instructional Category 2 in the present study: 63% females and 37% males. The gender balance is better in the other two categories: IC1 (53%: 47%) and IC3 (46%: 54%). The fact that female students outnumber male students overall (see Table 3.1) can be explained by the fact that there are more Higher Level Irish classes than Ordinary Level Irish classes in the Initial Sample. Notwithstanding these small imbalances, the overall selection of students is sufficiently diverse for a small scale study of its kind.

3.2.3 The Target Sample

Those students who, it was hoped, would participate at Time 2 are known as the Target Sample. In order to be included in this sample a student had to fulfil all the following requirements at Time 1:

i. be willing and available to participate in the follow-up study at Time 2,
ii. not plan to continue studying Irish as a main subject in a third level course,
iii. have completed all language tests (including Speaking Test) at Time 1.

Information in relation to (i) and (ii) was collected by means of a Student Questionnaire at Time 1 (see below). To encourage students from all proficiency levels and backgrounds to participate in the follow-up study, a small monetary reward was promised to be paid at Time 2. Ninety five of the Initial Sample fulfilled the three requirements above and will be referred to as the Target Sample.

3.2.4 The Final Sample

The second phase of data collection took place during November and December 2001. All 95 individuals from the Target Sample were contacted during the Summer of 2001 and again in September/October of that year. In a letter from the researcher, they were reminded of the follow-up interview which they had agreed to do. They were informed that the interview would last approximately one hour and 15 minutes and that they would, as promised at Time 1, be paid £25 (£30 approximately) on completion of this second interview. In the event just sixty-one of Target Sample agreed or were able to participate at Time 2. However, two of these who were scheduled for interview during December 2001 were unable to attend. Thus, the Final Sample comprised 59 students.

A disproportionate number of individuals from Instructional Category 1 (compared to the other two categories) did not make themselves available at Time 2, despite the monetary award and their promise at Time 1 to participate in a follow-up interview. Thus, while 28% of the Target Sample came from Instructional Category 1, the corresponding percentage for the Final Sample is 17% (see last row of Table 3.2a below). It is worth noting that many of the Instructional Category 1 students contacted were in full time or part-time employment and thus the financial reward may not have held the same attraction for them as for others who did not have a regular income. On a practical level also, it was more difficult to arrange interviews with students who had
full or part-time jobs. Another reason for non-participation may involve low self-esteem in relation to Irish. Analyses to be presented in Chapter 4 indicate that Instructional Category 1 students in the Initial Sample and in the Target Sample had significantly lower overall motivation and higher anxiety in relation to learning Irish than the rest of the students in those samples.

Table 3.2a
Final Sample: Percentage of participants by Instructional Category & Educational Sector at Time 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currently in ...</th>
<th>Instructional Category 1 (n=10)</th>
<th>Instructional Category 2 (n=38)</th>
<th>Instructional Category 3 (n=11)</th>
<th>Final Sample (n=59)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full time employment</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Education</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private college</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2b
Final Sample: Occupation/Field of study of participants at Time 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation/Field of study</th>
<th>Percentage of participants Final Sample (n=59)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... In full time employment</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Humanities</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Law</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Business</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Business and Information Technology</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Information Technology</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Technology (e.g. electronics)</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Science</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Medical Science</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Art and Design</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Architecture</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2a above shows that by Time 2 all but one of the Final Sample were in third-level education courses. It is worth noting that the percentage of Leaving Certificate students going on to third level education in Ireland has grown significantly in the last decade (Clancy, 1995). Three-quarters of participants in the Final Sample in the present study are in University, a further 17% are in an Institute of Technology while the remainder are in either a Private College or doing a Post Leaving Certificate Course. The proportion in the current study who are in University is much higher than in the general population: on average, only about half of all third-level entrants go to University (Lynch et al., 1999). Table 3.2b show, that participants are well distributed across different fields of study, though the most common field of study by far in this group is Humanities (27.1%).
3.2.5 Method and procedure

Data collection at Time 1

Ideally, it would have been best to test students’ Irish skills directly before they leave school i.e. just as they complete their formal study of Irish. However, the Leaving Certificate Examination (see section 1.7.1) is a high stakes examination with important consequences for students in terms of future study and career options and, therefore, it would be inappropriate to conduct testing too close to the examination itself when students are under pressure studying and revising coursework. Thus, initial language testing commenced approximately two to three months before the Leaving Certificate Examination, in the Spring of 2000.

A week or so, prior to language testing, a Student Questionnaire (see section 3.3.1 below) was distributed to all students in the 12 classes selected. On selected dates from late January through early February 2000, the specially designed ITÉ listening test (see section 3.3.3) followed by the C-test (see section 3.3.2) were administered to all students present during the usual Irish lesson. Due to absenteeism, only 229 of a possible total of 257 students completed the C-test and the listening test (see Table 3.1 above). Of these students, 64 (4 classes) came from Instructional Category 1, 121 (6 classes) from Instructional Category 2, and 44 (2 classes) from Instructional Category 3. After these tests had been administered to all 12 classes, the researcher started the next round of testing i.e. the administration of the speaking test.

The Irish speaking test was administered on dates from late February through early March 2000. In each of the 12 classes, samples of approximately one-third of students who were considered suitable for inclusion in the follow-up study were administered the speaking test. Students who reported in the Student Questionnaire that they planned to continue the study of Irish as a main subject in the following academic year (e.g. at third level) were excluded from the selection process. The speaking test was individually administered by means of a tape-mediated (semi-direct) oral interview to the Target Sample (further details given below in 3.3.3). A quiet location had to be found in each school to conduct these interviews and a timetable for attendance drawn up. As far as possible, students chose interview time slots (e.g. Irish class/free class periods) which did not interfere with their lessons in other subject areas.

Data collection at Time 2

This phase of the study was conducted between late October and early December 2001, approximately 20 months since participants were first tested and a year and a half since they finished studying Irish in secondary school. In order to avoid the possibility that participants might engage in extra Irish practice before testing, the target group was not given any specific details relating to the actual content of the interview. In addition, they were advised not to allow self-perceptions of low ability in Irish or loss of Irish skills to discourage them from participating.

The researcher conducted testing in one of three locations chosen by the participant:

(i) The college in which the participant was studying,
(ii) The researcher’s place of work,
(iii) The participant’s own home.

All interviews were conducted by the author.
3.3 The research instruments

When designing the language tests the researcher had a number of aims in mind. One was to be able to link differences in Irish proficiency and maintenance to certain student characteristics or instructional background. Curriculum independent tests of Irish proficiency would generally be considered best to discriminate between individuals or groups of individuals. However, using curriculum independent tests of spoken Irish in the present study would not have been feasible for practical as well as financial reasons. First, there are no existing standardised tests of spoken Irish for learners at secondary school level. Second, designing such tests would require considerable resources and planning i.e. a large team of experts, item writers and widespread pre-testing of items. Consequently, it was considered more appropriate for the purposes of this research study to design a test of spoken Irish (Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish) which would assess students’ competence in relation to certain listening and speaking Irish objectives as set out in the Leaving Certificate Irish syllabus (see section 1.7.2). Though criterion-referenced in this sense, such tests (see sections 3.3.3 & 3.3.4) could also be used to discriminate between individuals in the way the Leaving Certificate Examination itself does.

While changes over time in skills relating to spoken Irish were to be the main focus of this study, it was also decided to measure participants’ general proficiency in Irish. One type of test, which can be curriculum independent, is relatively inexpensive to design and which is regarded as a good overall measure of general second-language proficiency, is the C-test (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1998). With this in mind, a C-test in Irish was designed for the purposes of the present study (see section 3.3.2).

The first research instrument to be used was the Student Questionnaire (see section 3.3.1) and was administered just ahead of the language tests - a few months before students completed their secondary education. The questionnaire which is described in detail below was designed mainly to collect information on students’ attitude/motivation to learning Irish, self-assessed ability in spoken Irish and use of Irish outside of school. In the follow-up study, those participating were asked to complete a smaller questionnaire (see section 3.3.5). In this Participant’s Questionnaire, the items focussed mainly on participants’ current use of Irish, their attitude to Irish then and while at secondary school. Each of the research instruments will now be described in more detail.

3.3.1 Student Questionnaire

A copy of the actual Student Questionnaire used can be found in Appendix C. The majority of the 78 items in the questionnaire gathered information relating to students’ attitude/motivation in relation to learning Irish. The questionnaire was divided into four sections.

Adapting the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery for the present study

The first 70 items of the Student Questionnaire were based on items in the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) used by Robert C. Gardner to measure the attitude/motivation of Canadians learning French (Gardner, 1985a, 1985b). Of specific interest
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in the AMTB are three composite measures or clusters of scales which were identified as being the major components of overall attitude/motivation. According to Gardner, the first component, Motivation, refers to an individual who (a) wants to achieve a particular goal, (b) devotes considerable effort to achieving this goal and (c) experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving the goal. The corresponding scales or measures associated with this concept of Motivation in the AMTB are (a) Desire to learn the language (b) Motivational intensity to learn the language (c) Attitudes towards learning the language.

The second cluster, Integrativeness, refers to those learner attributes which reflect a positive outlook toward the target language group, or out-groups in general, or a desire to meet with and possibly associate with members of those groups. In the AMTB, these attributes were represented by three measures (a) Attitudes toward the target language group (b) Interest in foreign languages and (c) Integrative orientation. The third cluster Attitudes to the learning situation, refers to the learners’ affective reactions to the learning situation e.g. attitudes towards the teacher, the class, the textbooks, the language laboratory etc. In the AMTB these are measured by (a) Evaluation of the language teacher and (b) Evaluation of the language course. Studies by Lalonde and Gardner (1985) found that of the three major components described above, Motivation (comprising three scales) was the best predictor in the case of three different criterion measures – behavioural intention to study French, final French grades, and a global measure of French achievement.

The format of the questionnaire

So as not to place excessive demands on participants it was decided that the number of items in the questionnaire would be kept to a minimum. Consequently, not all AMTB scales could be included. The final document contained items relating to

1. three AMTB-based Motivation scales: Attitude Toward Learning the Language, Desire to Learn the Language and Motivational Intensity
2. an Irish Course Evaluation scale from the AMTB-based Attitudes toward the Learning Situation measure
3. an AMTB-based Class Anxiety scale
4. an AMTB-based Parental Encouragement scale.

Motivation scales were used rather than Integrativeness scales because a study of attitude/motivation in relation to Irish at primary school (Harris & Murtagh, 1999) found Motivation to be a better predictor of achievement in Irish than Integrativeness. In addition, Motivation measures had correlated positively and significantly with the Integrativeness measures in that study.

The wording of items in the questionnaire was kept as close as possible to that in the original AMTB items. Changes were only made to make items relevant to the Irish context e.g. the substitution of the word ‘Irish’ for ‘French’. The 70 AMTB-based items are not grouped according to scales but presented in a scrambled order within three sections. To assist the reader, items from the original questionnaire in Appendix C have been tagged according to the scale to which they belong.

Section 1 contains 25 items or statements related to one Motivation scale (Attitude to Learning Irish) and to two other AMTB-based scales (Parental Encouragement and Irish-Class Anxiety). Items are randomly presented followed by a seven-point Likert
response format (Likert, 1932) ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (7). In order to eliminate response bias, a few items were negatively worded. However, for consistency with Gardner’s (1985a) and Harris and Murtagh’s (1999) studies, the majority of items were positively worded. Below is a more detailed description of items and scales:

i. Attitude to Learning Irish (ATLI): This ten item scale contains five items which are positively worded, and five which express negative sentiments (e.g. I really enjoy learning Irish/Learning Irish is a waste of time). Responses to negative statements were recoded for scoring. A high score (maximum=70) on this scale indicates a positive attitude towards learning Irish.

ii. Irish Class Anxiety (ICA): Five items reflecting students’ degree of discomfort while participating in the Irish lesson. (e.g. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my Irish class). A high score (maximum=35) indicates high anxiety.

iii. Parental Encouragement (PE): This scale contains ten positively worded items designed to assess the extent to which students feel their parents support them in their study of Irish (e.g. My parents really encourage me to study Irish). A high score (maximum=70) indicates a high level of perceived parental encouragement.

In Section 2 there are twenty multiple-choice type items with three options a, b or c. These items, presented in randomised order, represent the two remaining AMTB-based Motivation scales: Motivational Intensity and Desire to Learn Irish. In Appendix C, the weights (or scores) for each alternative are printed in front of options, but these do not appear in the actual Student’s Questionnaire.

i. Motivational Intensity (MI): This measure consists of ten multiple-choice items which are designed to measure the intensity of a student’s motivation to learn Irish in terms of classroom participation, work done for classroom assignments, future plans to make use of and study the language etc. A high score (maximum=30) represents a high degree of self-reported effort expended acquiring Irish.

ii. Desire to Learn Irish (DTLI): Ten multiple-choice items are included in this scale with a high score (maximum=30) expressing a strong desire to learn and speak Irish as much as possible.

Section 3 evaluates students’ ideas and impressions of the Irish course they are studying. Each item is scored on a seven point semantic differential scale. The overall evaluation of the Irish Course (Irish Course Evaluation Total) is made up of four course-related factors:

i. Irish Course Utility: Five scales comprise this subtest – noneducational-educational, meaningless-meaningful, unnecessary-necessary, useless-useful, and unimportant-important. A high score (maximum=35) is associated with a high level of perceived utility.

ii. Irish Course Evaluation: General evaluative reactions to the Irish course are assessed with 10 scales: bad-good, disagreeable-agreeable, painful-pleasurable, unsatisfying-satisfying, awful-nice, unpleasant-pleasant, unenjoyable-enjoyable, unrewarding-rewarding, worthless-valuable, and unappealing-appealing (keyed
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iii. Irish Course Interest: Five scores are summed so that the higher the scores (maximum=35) the more interest learners had in the course. The scales are: tedious-fascinating, monotonous-absorbing, boring-interesting, dull-exciting, and colourless-colourful.

iv. Irish Course Difficulty: Ratings on five scales are summed to provide an estimate (maximum=35) of the perceived difficulty of the course. The scales are: simple-complicated, elementary-complex, effortless-hard, clear-confusing and easy-difficult.

Section 4 of the Student Questionnaire contains eight items which are not at all related to the AMTB. The first four items seek information on student self-assessed ability to speak Irish and use of Irish outside of school (see Appendix C: Section 4). In the first of these questions, students are asked to assess their ability in Irish on a scale which has been used in national surveys of use and ability in Irish. The second question which was also used in the national surveys asks students how often Irish is used by anyone in their home. The third question collects information on the extent to which students use Irish outside of school while in the fourth question they are asked to list the actual situations outside of the school in which they use Irish.

The last four items in Section 4 (see Appendix C) sought practical information which was needed in order to select suitable students for the longitudinal study. Thus, information was collected on: (i) whether the student planned to continue studying Irish after leaving school and if so what the nature of that study might be (ii) the student's plans for the next academic year e.g. to get a job, go on to third level education, stay on in school and repeat the Leaving Certificate Examination (iii) the student’s willingness to report back their Leaving Certificate grades to the researcher and (iv) their willingness to participate in the longitudinal study i.e. agree to an interview at the end of 2001.

Administration

Approximately one week before any language testing commenced in a school, the researcher gave the Irish class teacher a set of Student Questionnaires. The teacher distributed the questionnaires and accompanying envelopes to all students at the end of the next Irish lesson. The teacher asked students to fill in the questionnaire in a single session on their own and at home if possible. They were told to place the completed questionnaire in the envelope provided, seal the envelope and return it to the teacher at the next Irish lesson. In a short written note, on the inside cover of the questionnaire booklet, students were given a brief general description of the study and were told that the research was interested only in their own personal opinions in relation to items. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

Of the 257 questionnaires distributed 241 (94%) were returned (see Table 3.1). The response rates for each of Instructional Categories 1, 2 and 3 were 95%, 92% and 98% respectively.
3.3.2 The Irish C-Test (ICT)

The C-test is a modified version of the Cloze test and based on the same theoretical principle of reduced redundancy (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1998). In order to be fairer in terms of test context, several short texts are used in the C-test rather than one long text as in the Cloze test. To avoid difficulties associated with choice of deletion rate and ratio of deleted content words to deleted structure words, the second half of every second word is deleted in the C-test, not whole words as in the Cloze test. The first and last sentences of each text used in the C-test, however, are left intact.

C-tests are considered to model authentic linguistic behaviour but are not intended to be communicative. As mentioned earlier, the C-test has been shown to be a strong predictor of overall second language (L2) proficiency (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1998) as well as L2 oral competence (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1983). It is also regarded as being superior to other test procedures in the areas of difficulty level, reliability and validity (Klein-Braley, 1997). The C-test has been criticised for its poor construct validity i.e. it is not clear exactly what skills it assesses (Anckaert & Beeckmans, 1992; Stemmer, 1992). However, as pointed out elsewhere (Dörnyei & Katona, 1992) this criticism could also be made in respect of the Cloze test and other psychometric tests such as aptitude tests.

The C-test designers (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1985, 1998) give a number of useful guidelines regarding the type of texts to be chosen. Texts should

- be written texts each of which are complete as a sense unit
- be appropriate in difficulty and content for the target group
- have no specialised vocabulary or content
- not be literary texts or contain verbal humour
- native speakers should score at least 95% correct on each text.

Raatz and Klein-Braley recommended at least 100 items/deletions using four texts of between 60-70 words each. However, Grotjahn (1987; 1992) has suggested the use of longer texts (allowing up to 25-30 deletions each) to measure macro-level textual constraints (i.e. use of context through top-down/bottom up strategies) in C-test processing.

The C-test was used in the present study as a measure of overall proficiency in Irish. Its lexical focus has the potential to yield interesting information in relation to attrition of vocabulary. By being sensitive to the use of words in context, it is also considered to reflect closely “the realities of language use” (Little & Singleton, 1992: 175). Finally, the test has the advantage of being cheap, quick and easy to administer as well as to score.

Constructing the Irish C-Test

The format used in constructing the Irish C-Test (see Appendix E) was similar to that recommended by Raatz and Klein-Braley (1985; 1998). First, a number of Irish texts from authentic written sources i.e. magazines and newspapers were gathered. Four were selected for their suitability in terms of difficulty and content i.e. the kind of topics and materials which Leaving Certificate Irish students would be familiar with. The Irish texts varied in length from 87-101 words with between 27-31 deletions each. The first and last sentence of each piece of text were left intact. Deletion started with
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the second half of the second word in the second sentence. One letter words were ignored. While Raatz and Klein-Braley treated elided forms (e.g. d’) as belonging to the words to which they are attached, the present study treated them as one letter words as recommended by Grotjahn (1987: 225). Thus, they were not taken into account at all in the deletion process.

The four Irish texts were pretested on six adults: two recent secondary school leavers who had attended ‘ordinary’ (English-medium) schools, two school leavers who had attended all-Irish medium secondary schools and two older adults who were native speakers. As a result of this pretesting one of the texts was discarded as being too difficult. At any rate, time constraints meant that only three texts could be included in the final version. The non-native speakers scored between 70-80% of items correct on the selected texts while between 98-100% of the native speakers’ restorations were correct. The latter satisfies Raatz and Klein Braley’s (1985; 1998) 95% specification (see above).

The three texts used in the final version of the C-test were sequentially ordered based on the intuitive judgements of the individuals involved in the pre-test and the author. The number of deletions for Text 1, Text 2, and Text 3 were 27, 30 and 31 respectively. Each deletion was represented in the written text by a line, the length of which was proportional to the number of missing letters.

Coding and scoring of the C-test

Entries were coded according to the set of categories below which is similar to that used by Grotjahn (1987):

0. Blank not filled in
1. Original word without spelling error
2. ‘Acceptable alternative’ without spelling error and having the correct number of letters
3. ‘Acceptable alternative’ without spelling error but having too many/too few letters
4. Original word with spelling error (recognisable original word though misspelled)
5. ‘Acceptable alternative’ with spelling error
6. Unacceptable word with regard to grammar and/or text content.

Acceptable alternatives are interpreted as “orthographically and morpho-syntactically well-formed and semantically appropriate” words (Little & Singleton, 1992: 177).

An exact scoring procedure was advocated by Raatz and Klein-Braley (1982). Using such a method would mean that only words in category 1 above (‘original word without spelling error’) should be accepted as correct. However, in the present study it was felt that such an exact scoring procedure could not be justified. In this respect, the author concurs with Little and Singleton (1992: 177) who in their study argued that “ruling out acceptable responses on the grounds that they did not coincide with the particular choice of the author of the text” ran counter to their purposes.

Thus, restorations falling into category 1 or category 2 are scored as correct. Blanks (0) and restorations falling into categories 3-6 are scored as incorrect. The reason why Category 3 (acceptable alternative with too many or two few letters) responses are rejected is that a candidate could reject a syntactically/semantically appropriate
retention purely on the basis that it did not have the required number of letters, as specified in the instructions (see Appendix E).

Administration of ICT: Time 1
The Irish C-Test was administered after the listening test in each of the 12 classes. Twenty minutes were allowed for administration – a few minutes for students to read the instructions and look at the sample text and between 4-6 minutes to complete each text.

Administration of ICT: Time 2
At Time 2, the Irish C-Test, like all the other tests, was administered as part of the individual interview and after the listening and speaking tests.

3.3.3 Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish (TPSI) – Listening Section
The listening comprehension test (see Appendix D) was designed to test various aspects of students’ listening skills as set down in the established Leaving Certificate Irish syllabus described in the previous chapter. The intention was to assess listening comprehension in a global way as a communicative speech act. This contrasts with traditional listening tests in which skills are measured separately under the various skill headings. The testing format was based on that used by CITO (The National Institute for Educational Measurement in the Netherlands) in its listening comprehension tests. The specific tests on which the present test was modelled were designed for Dutch students learning a second language at Levels C-D (CITO, 1998a).

The format of the communicatively based listening test in Irish
The items used in the Irish listening test require no written or oral response from the candidate. A multiple-choice or true/false type response format is used and candidates indicate their preferences by ticking the appropriate box. It was not possible to include response tasks involving some overt behaviour from candidates because of the limited time available for testing and the Irish students’ lack of familiarity with such a strategy.

Samples of speech from different types of oral Irish discourse were used in the test. These included a telephone conversation, a radio weather report, an interview and a radio news interview. The fact that the objectives tested had to be suitable for Ordinary Level Irish students as well as for Higher Level Irish students limited to some extent the nature of the texts selected.

The four samples of oral discourse were taken from authentic or semi-authentic situations, transcribed and then re-enacted in the studio. Some changes had to be made to accommodate lower proficiency levels and match course expectations. For example, in most cases the original rate of authentic speech was slowed down somewhat and strong dialectical features changed or removed for the tape script (as happens in the Leaving Certificate Aural Examination in Irish). However, as far as possible, alterations from the original text were kept to a minimum. Redundancy, false starts, hemming and hawing, etc. were retained.

The majority of changes occurred in Section Four of the test which involved a radio interview featuring speakers using different Irish dialects (Connacht Irish and Ulster Irish). Some texts were not changed at all, as in the case of Section Two - a weather
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The test was developed to assess language comprehension skills rather than memory skills. The test consisted of four sections, each designed to test different types of discourse material.

1. Telephone Conversation (6 items): The candidate listens to a conversation and ticks ‘True’, ‘False’ or ‘Information not given’ in relation to a series of six statements. Two of the items which were regarded as being slightly more complicated were given a weighting (x 2). The maximum score attainable on this section of the test is 8.

2. Radio Weather Report (5 items): The candidate listens to a weather report and ticks ‘True’, ‘False’ or ‘Information not given’ in relation to a series of five statements. In the case of four of the five statements only one of the three response options was correct and was assigned a score of 2. However, in the case of item 2.4 (d), the ‘False’ option was acceptable and, if selected, was awarded a score of ‘1’ while the ‘Information not given’ option, being considered the superior choice, was awarded a score of 2. The maximum score on this subtest was 10 (5 x 2).

3. Dialogue/Interview (4 items): The candidate hears a young person talk about herself, her interests, her work etc. There are four items tested using a multiple-choice format. The maximum score attainable is 8 (4 x 2).

4. Radio News Interview (4 items): The candidate listens to a radio item in which a broadcaster is talking to a news reporter on location. There are four multiple-choice items. The maximum score attainable is 8 (4 x 2).

Administration of the Irish Listening Test – Time 1

The listening test was administered by the researcher to twelve class groups during February 2000. There is both an English and an Irish version of the test (Appendix D). The Irish version (all instructions in Irish) was used in the two ‘all-Irish’ (Instructional Category 3) classes while the English version (all instructions in English) was used in all other classes.

The test takes about 25 minutes to administer. Before the tape starts, candidates are given a few minutes during which to look over the written items in their test booklets. A short text at the beginning of each section sets the scene for the task. This is followed by the written form of the questions and the answer options. The candidate has this text in front of him/her while the tape is playing and is given plenty of time in which to record answers (tick options). Each sample of speech is played twice. Teachers consulted during test design were of the opinion that test items should be played at least twice because that is the format used in the Leaving Certificate Aural Irish examination and thus what students expect or are familiar with.
A total of 229 completed listening test booklets were collected at Time 1 (see Table 3.1).

**Administration of the Irish Listening Test – Time 2**
The listening test was individually administered at Time 2. As at Time 1, it was the first test to be administered as it was felt that the listening exercise would be a good warm-up for the speaking test which followed. The candidate was given the same version (Irish or English) of the test as she/he had chosen at Time 1.

### 3.3.4 Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish – Speaking Section

The tasks and scales used in the speaking test were not intended to be representative of all aspects of communicative ability in Irish. The test is a research instrument which assessed a number of major speaking objectives shared by the Ordinary and Higher Level Irish syllabi for senior cycle. In general, the test aimed to measure a candidate’s control over the language used to realize certain desired speech acts. With the exception of the Pronunciation subtest, performance on specific tasks is assessed in terms of communicative impact (e.g. the amount of information contained in the speaker’s utterances, its relevance and appropriateness) and the level of linguistic or grammatical accuracy. The scales used vary according to the task involved.

**The semi-direct test versus the direct test of oral proficiency**

The most commonly used method to assess oral proficiency is the traditional interview method or face-to-face interview. This direct method is used in the current Irish Leaving Certificate oral examinations in Irish (see section 1.7.3). Another well known example of a direct test is the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) adopted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (Byrnes, Thompson, & Buck, 1989). This type of interview is communicative in that it mimics real life situations which elicit authentic type discourse in the target language.

In the present study, oral proficiency was tested by means of a semi-direct interview, a method which appeared first in the 1980’s in the United States (ETS, 1982). Such simulated or semi-direct interview tests do not need a live interviewer. The candidate speaks in response to audio-recorded instructions/tasks and visual stimuli (written instructions, pictures/drawings). Responses are tape recorded so that performance can be assessed retrospectively by trained raters. The semi-direct test is uniform as all candidates perform the same or similar language tasks. One example of the semi-direct interview, developed by the Centre for Applied Linguistics in the US, is the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI). It was developed in a number of languages (Clark, 1988; Shohamy, Gordon, Kenyon, & Stansfield, 1989; Shohamy & Stansfield, 1991; Stansfield & Kenyon, 1988). The SOPI has been described (Shohamy, 1994: 117) as a type of monologue in L2, based on tasks presented in L1, after a short planning time and with a sharp shift from one topic to another.

According to Cohen (1994: 273) the aim of the SOPI is to shorten test time while obtaining a broader sampling of the speaker’s interlanguage than the oral interview would generally do, in a reliable, valid and efficient manner. The direct and indirect speaking tests are considered to be equally valid measures of oral proficiency. Inter-rater reliability between direct and indirect tests has been shown to be uniformly high
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In one study (O’Loughlin, 1995) the same group of learners of English at the ‘minimum vocational level of oral proficiency’ were tested using direct and semi-direct tests. Tasks were matched by language function and structure of task but not topic. The high correlation ($r=.92$) between the two test scores led O’Loughlin to conclude, in this case, that the performances seemed to be ‘generated from the same general oral proficiency’.

One measurement which has been used to compare the two test formats is that of ‘lexical density’. This term was first used by Ure (1971) to refer to the measure of the relationship between the number of words with lexical as opposed to grammatical properties as a percentage of the total number of words in a text. Shohamy (1994) compared the lexical density of the SOPI and the OPI and found greater lexical density in the semi-direct test (see also Cohen, 1994). The capacity of the semi-direct test to produce higher levels of ‘lexical density’ has also been noted elsewhere (O’Loughlin, 1995; Zora & Johns-Lewis, 1989).

Description and format of the speaking test in Irish

The speaking test (see Appendix F) was divided into six main sections or tasks each testing specific aspects of the candidate’s communicative competence in Irish. The tasks were based on a test of spoken English devised by CITO for Dutch secondary school students who are leaving the vocational programme (CITO, 1998b). This particular test was chosen (rather than that for the higher level HAVO programme) as it corresponds more closely with topics and functions in both the Ordinary Level and Higher Level Irish Leaving Certificate syllabi for spoken Irish.

In order to assess attrition/retention of an individual’s oral skills over time, it is preferable that the same speaking test be administered at Time 1 and Time 2. A uniform test is also desirable because of the need to compare particular groups of students i.e. those from different instructional backgrounds. A semi-direct testing format (described above) fulfils this requirement as well as having a number of other desirable features:

1. the possibility of including a good variety of language tasks which could elicit a greater range of linguistic phenomena than a direct test (Perret, 1990)
2. the avoidance of potential bias of differential interviewer interaction on candidates’ performance (by using a tape-mediated testing format)
3. the ability to standardise a candidate’s planning time and response time for items
4. the ability to score responses retrospectively from the audiotape recordings thereby increasing rater accuracy and facilitating a test of inter-rater reliability.

Test instructions, sample items and test items are all provided on the audiotape. The candidate’s booklet contains all of this information along with line drawings in the case of subtests 2-6. The test starts with a Pronunciation subtest. This is the only subtest which involves reading aloud. In general, the easiest tasks were placed at the beginning of test. However, in order to prevent candidates from finishing with a feeling of disappointment or dissatisfaction, section 6 of the test was designed to be easier than section 5. The majority of the tasks in the Irish test correspond closely to those used in the CITO (1998b) test in terms of functions covered. However, the content and scales differ substantially in many cases. The maximum score attainable on the Irish speaking test is 66.
Below is a short description of each subtest.

1. Pronunciation: A text of approximately 200 words in length is to be read aloud by the candidate. Fourteen sounds or combinations of sounds are scored as right/wrong (maximum score = 14).

2. Reacting Appropriately (Role play): The candidate must react appropriately in five thematically linked situations depicted in line drawings. The situations involve the use of communicative functions such as requesting, complaining, thanking. Each reaction is judged according to a three-point scale of Appropriateness (see below) (maximum score = 10).

3. Telling a Story (Describing an event): The candidate must tell a continuous story in the past tense based on a series of six chronologically ordered drawings. The first few words of the story are provided. Time is allowed for the candidate to study the pictures beforehand. The story is assessed on three different scales – Completeness, Fluency-Vocabulary Adequacy and Grammatical Accuracy (maximum score = 10).

4. Giving an Opinion: The candidate must give an opinion on a topic considered to be of general interest to students. The candidate’s response is assessed on three different scales: Relevance, Fluency-Vocabulary Adequacy and Grammatical Accuracy (maximum score = 10).

5. Describing Objects: This subtest assesses the candidate’s ability to describe three culturally significant objects so that a listener without previous knowledge could easily identify them, understand their function etc. Each item is assessed on two scales – Comprehensibility/Vocabulary Adequacy and Grammatical Accuracy (maximum score = 12).

6. Giving Instructions/Advice: The candidate must give appropriate verbal advice or instructions consistent with a procedure outlined in five drawings (one drawing per item). Each item is assessed on a three-point scale of Appropriateness (maximum score = 10).

Developing Scales for the Irish Speaking Test

The process of developing the test and scoring procedure was a painstaking task done with the assistance of experienced secondary school teachers of Irish. Along with the researcher, these teachers evaluated the suitability of the test items in terms of difficulty and appropriateness. Their comments and opinions on the tasks and scales were crucial to the whole test development process. The final set of guidelines and scales used in the correction process can be found in Appendix G.

While the format of the tasks in the Irish speaking test was similar to that used in the CITO test, the scales were altered substantially in a number of tasks. For instance, in Tasks 3, 4, and 5, the scales were expanded as it was felt that the corresponding two point scales in the CITO test would not be sensitive enough to discriminate between candidates of different ability levels. In the case of one task or subtest, a scale used in the CITO test was omitted in the Irish test because it was felt that the information was duplicated in another scale for that same subtest. The CITO subtest ‘Describing an Event/Tell a Story’ had two scales, ‘Completeness’ and ‘Detail’. From an examination of responses to the corresponding subtest in the Irish pretests it was considered that the ‘Completeness’ scale itself adequately captured the candidate’s attention to ‘detail’ in
the story told. Finally, in subtests 3 and 4, two scales were combined: ‘Fluency’ and ‘Vocabulary Adequacy’ were assessed jointly on a five point scale (a fuller explanation is given below). All adaptations were made on the basis of discussions between the researcher and teachers.

*Appropriateness* in the present context includes both situational relevance and sociolinguistic appropriateness. Deciding what constitutes an ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ reaction in a situation may be difficult. Individuals all have their own unique style of responding to events and thus candidates are not discriminated against for using a personal style as long as the response is not socially inept or inappropriate. What test items are trying to elicit is a genuine reaction in a simulated social situation. In general, the corrector’s spontaneous reaction to, or immediate assessment of, the candidate’s utterance is often the best indicator of appropriateness.

As mentioned above, *Fluency* is assessed in combination with *Vocabulary Adequacy* in two tasks ‘Telling a Story’ and ‘Giving an Opinion’. Both tasks aim to elicit an extended piece of discourse from the candidate. Initial attempts to assess *Fluency* and *Vocabulary Adequacy* separately proved complicated as fluency depends to a large extent on the ease of access to lexical items. Though fluency usually refers to the smooth flow of speech, it cannot be assessed solely in terms of the speed of utterances or the absence of pauses or hesitations because native speakers often pause or hesitate when formulating (or reformulating) an opinion or expressing a view. It has been suggested that the very hesitation phenomena that makes second language speech seem broken may really be signs that the speaker is searching for an appropriate lexical item or syntactic structure (Cohen, 1994: 290).

*Comprehensibility* measures the extent to which the description of objects is comprehensible i.e. clear and precise. A listener should be able to identify the object in question based on this oral description. In Task 5, *Comprehensibility* is assessed in conjunction with *Vocabulary Adequacy*.

*Completeness* measures the candidate’s ability to give a detailed account of a story e.g. based on a set of pictures.

The *Relevance* scale assesses the extent to which the candidate’s response is relevant to the topic - responding to the main elements of the set task.

*Grammatical Accuracy* was based on the scale of Grammatical Ability defined by Cohen (1994: 286). It assesses how acceptably words, phrases and sentences are formed and pronounced in the candidate’s utterances. Errors in form, are classified as either major or minor. ‘Major errors’ are those that either interfere with intelligibility or stigmatise the speaker. ‘Minor errors’ are those that do not get in the way of the listener’s comprehension or annoy the listener to any great extent. Cohen (1994: 286) illustrates these differences using examples from learners of English whose native language is Hebrew:

“Getting the tense wrong in ‘We have seen a great film last night’ could be viewed as a minor error whereas producing ‘I don’t have what to say’ by translating directly from the appropriate Hebrew language could be considered a major error since it is not only ungrammatical but also could stigmatise the speaker as rude and unconcerned, rather than apologetic”.

If a candidate’s response is very short then the probability of producing errors is dramatically reduced. Thus, Grammatical Accuracy ratings should reflect this fact i.e. the rating awarded should be towards the lower end of the scale. On the other hand, candidates who give extended responses – longer than necessary to respond to the set task – should not be penalised for errors in the superfluous discourse.

Administration of the Speaking Test at Time 1
Shortly before Time 1 interviews, information leaflets were distributed to participants describing the test procedure and general format of the test. This information was considered necessary as this type of testing approach would be new to them. The interviews took place in a quiet location or room within the school. On entering the room the researcher welcomed the student in the target language and explained the testing procedure in whichever language (Irish or English) he/she felt most comfortable with. The student sat at a table on which was placed a small portable tape player and a portable digital ‘mini-disc’ recorder. The researcher sat informally to one side. A small lapel microphone was used to pick up the student’s responses which were recorded on the ‘mini-discs’. Also provided was the participant’s test booklet (see Appendix F). ‘All-Irish’ school (Instructional Category 3) students were given the Irish version (Irish instructions) of the test while the ‘ordinary’ school students preferred the version with English instructions. Each participant was given a minute or two to read the general instructions from the front cover of the test booklet (see Appendix F). When the participant indicated that she/he was ready to begin the test, both the tape-player and ‘mini-disc’ recorder were started. The researcher remained present during the test but intervention was kept to a minimum.

The first two questions on the tape are used as a short warm-up asking the participant his/her name and date of birth. These questions also help candidates get used to the testing procedure e.g. waiting for the audible prompt before responding. The first task of the test proper is to read aloud a piece of text (pronunciation). This task acts as a gentle introduction to speaking in the target language. All subtests or tasks are allocated a set amount of preparation and implementation time which varies according to the nature of the task. For example, in Task 6, 30 seconds preparation/planning time is allowed to study six pictures describing a procedure while ten seconds are allowed for candidates to respond to each picture. In Task 4, Giving an Opinion, candidates are given two and a half minutes to prepare their monologue and three minutes in which to deliver it.

Occasionally, the researcher had to stop the tape player and the mini-disc recorder when participants indicated that they had a problem or needed to ask a question relating to procedure. Generally, these interruptions were short.

Administration of the Speaking Test at Time 2
In general, the procedure in relation to administration of the speaking test was the same at Time 2 as at Time 1. Each participant received the same version of the test as had been used at Time 1 (Irish or English instructions). However, the interview venues were different on both occasions and, unlike Time 1, the listening test immediately preceded the speaking test at Time 2.
Scoring and inter-rater reliability of the speaking test
Scoring was done retrospectively from the mini-disc recordings of candidates’ responses using a set of scoring guidelines (see Appendix G). The guidelines specify that scores be assigned based on the descriptions set out in the various scales associated with each task. Responses to each item are to be scored independently of all others. In general, only discourse which occurs within the specified time limit for each item (i.e. between beeps) is assessed. However, exceptions are made where it is clear that participants were not ready or where external interruptions distracted them.

The corrector who is a practising and experienced teacher of Irish at second level spent about ten hours being trained in the scoring procedure. Over a half of this time was spent becoming familiar with the test and rating criteria, coding actual responses and comparing and discussing ratings with the author. This process continued until it was felt that the corrector was consistent in her ratings and that a common interpretation of the rating criteria had been achieved i.e. a high level of agreement between the author’s and corrector’s ratings (Lumley & McNamara, 1995). It should be noted also that the corrector was not involved either in the creation or administration of the test itself.

For the remainder of the training time the corrector rated a selection of ten speaking tests. This formed part of the reliability study. The researcher independently rated these same tests and the two sets of scores, score a and score b, were compared. Pearson correlations between scores a and b for each of the six subtests yielded significant r values ranging from .94 to 1.00. The statistical package SPSS was used to compute two inter-rater reliability coefficients - alpha and an intraclass correlation coefficient (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979; Yaffee, 1998). These coefficients were based on comparisons of the total speaking score as marked by rater a and rater b. The intraclass coefficient was .99 (F=586.97; df=9,9) while the alpha coefficient was also .99. While these coefficients would usually be based on larger samples, the strong effect in this case indicate a satisfactory level of agreement between the two sets of speaking test scores.

3.3.5 Participant’s Questionnaire at Time 2
The Participant’s Questionnaire was designed to collect information at Time 2 from Final Sample participants in relation to learning Irish and to their use of Irish since leaving secondary school. The questionnaire was kept short so that respondents would have time to complete it towards the end of the individual interview at Time 2. One item (3.1) relating to choice of course was different for those who had studied Ordinary Level Irish and for those who studied Higher Level Irish in the Leaving Certificate programme. Consequently, two versions of the questionnaire had to be produced (see last two pages of Appendix H).

Section 1 of the questionnaire collected information on participants’ self-assessed ability to speak Irish and on their use of the language since leaving secondary school. In order to compare change over time, the first two items (1.1-1.2) are exactly the same as in Section 4 of the Student Questionnaire (see Appendix C) at Time 1. The wording in the third item (1.3) is only slightly different to that used at Time 1. The latter referred to opportunity to use Irish outside of school in the past year. As it was
expected that Final Sample participants no longer studied Irish as a formal subject, the corresponding item in the Participant’s Questionnaire referred to general ‘opportunity to use Irish during the past year’. A new item (1.4) collected more detailed information on use of Irish since Time 1 in each of the four skill areas: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Two additional items (1.5 & 1.6) sought names of actual texts read and radio/TV programmes listened to/watched. The final item in the first section asks whether participants felt their attitude to Irish had changed since leaving secondary school.

Section 2 of the Participant’s Questionnaire comprises six multiple-choice items (see Appendix C: Items 2.1, 2.5, 2.6, 2.8, 2.13, 2.20) from the Desire to Learn Irish scale used at Time 1 (see section 3.3.1). It will be recalled that a high score on this scale (DTLI-1) indicates a strong desire to learn Irish and to speak Irish as much as possible. The four items from the original DTLI scale which were excluded referred to learning Irish in a school situation and, therefore, would not have been suitable for use at Time 2. Scores on the six remaining DTLI items can be added together to give a reduced DTLI scale at Time 2 (DTLI-2). The maximum score on this reduced scale is 18.

Section 3 of the Participant’s Questionnaire elicits respondents’ retrospective views in relation to their choice of the Ordinary Level or Higher Level Irish course in the Leaving Certificate Programme, and to the perceived benefits of the course and the study of Irish in school generally.