Retention and attrition of Irish as a second language
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6 Summary and conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises and discusses the main findings of this exploratory study which assessed Irish language skills of secondary school students before their final year (Leaving Certificate) examination and measured the retention of these skills over a period of approximately eighteen months after they left school. In section 6.2, the methodology used in the study will be presented and evaluated. The next two sections summarise the findings. Section 6.3 describes and discusses the first phase of the research which assessed proficiency in Irish, attitudes to learning Irish and extra-school use of Irish among Leaving Certificate students from three different instructional backgrounds. Section 6.4 summarises the findings of the longitudinal study for a subgroup of the initial sample and assesses the relevance of these outcomes for the retention of Irish and school-acquired second languages generally. Section 6.5 considers the implications of the study’s findings for the teaching of Irish in the school system and offers some suggestions for future policy in this area. Finally, recommendations will be made for further research to help extend our knowledge of the process of Irish language attrition/retention.

6.2 Methodology

6.2.1 Design of the study and participants

The primary aim of the study was to assess the extent to which Irish school leavers retain the Irish they have learned during their primary and secondary education. Thus, the basic design was a longitudinal study where final year secondary students were first interviewed and tested as they came towards the end of their formal school instruction in Irish (Time 1) and, again approximately eighteen months after they completed their final school examinations (Time 2). A secondary aim of the study was to assess initial proficiency and final proficiency in Irish of participants from three different instructional backgrounds and to ascertain the impact of general motivation and use on proficiency at both times of testing.

A simple way of ensuring a good mix of students at Time 1, in terms of proficiency and general use of Irish for real communication, was to select three groups of Leaving Certificate students: one studying the Ordinary Level Irish course in ‘ordinary’ (English-medium) secondary schools, another the Higher Level Irish course in ‘ordinary’ schools and a third group, also studying Higher Level Irish but the students attended one of the small minority of immersion (‘all-Irish’ medium) secondary schools. The term, Instructional Category, is used to refer to this 3-way grouping. The categories are

- Instructional Category 1 (IC1): Ordinary Level Irish students in ‘ordinary’ schools
- Instructional Category 2 (IC2): Higher Level Irish students in ‘ordinary’ schools
- Instructional Category 3 (IC3): Higher Level Irish students in immersion (‘all-Irish’ medium) schools
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Instructional Category 2 (IC2): Higher Level Irish students in ‘ordinary’ schools
Instructional Category 3 (IC3): Higher Level Irish students in ‘all-Irish’ schools.

Twelve Leaving Certificate classes from schools in the Dublin area with a total of 257 students agreed to participate in the initial study. Participation rates varied somewhat according to instructional background. Instructional Category 2 classes and students were over represented in this sample 1 (n=130).

Achievement data and background information collected from the Initial Sample (n=257) was seen as providing a useful yardstick for assessing the representativeness of those participating in the follow-up study. Thus, data relating to general and spoken Irish proficiency as well as measures of attitude/motivation to learning Irish and use of Irish outside of school were collected from this larger group. All students in this Initial Sample were assessed using a listening test and a C-test in Irish.

A smaller sub-sample, known as the Target Sample (n=95), whose members agreed to participate in the follow-up interview at Time 2 was also administered a speaking test. In the event, just 59 of this Target Sample were able to participate in the interview at Time 2. This latter group is known as the Final Sample.

6.2.2 The instruments

As there were no existing standardised objective tests of proficiency in spoken Irish suitable for secondary school students, a test was designed which aimed to assess candidates’ competence in relation to some basic communicative (listening and speaking) objectives in spoken Irish as defined in the Leaving Certificate Irish syllabus. This Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish (TPSI) contained a separate listening and a speaking section. The ‘listening’ test consists of multiple-choice/true-false items in which candidates listen to samples of discourse and indicate their preferences by ticking the appropriate box. Samples of speech from different types of oral Irish discourse were used in the test (telephone conversation, news broadcasts/reports and interviews). The maximum score attainable on the listening test is 34.

The total score attainable on the Irish speaking test is 66. Therefore, the overall TPSI (maximum score = 100) is heavily weighted in favour of the productive aspect of spoken Irish. The speaking test consists of six subtests, the first testing pronunciation and the remaining five tasks assessing the candidate’s ability to react appropriately, describe an event, give opinions, describe objects, and give advice/instructions. A semi-direct interviewing format was employed, a method first used in the 1980’s in the United States (ETS, 1982). A live interviewer is not required in such tests, thus eliminating the possibility of interviewer bias. The candidate listens to audio-recorded sample items and instructions relating to tasks and items. In the case of the Irish speaking test, a test booklet contains the same information along with visual images (line drawings) for five tasks. Responses are tape recorded so that performance can be assessed retrospectively.

While changes over time in skills relating to spoken Irish was to be the main focus of this study, it was also decided to measure participants’ overall or general proficiency in Irish. One type of test which, can be curriculum independent, is relatively inexpensive to design, and regarded as a good overall measure of general
second-language proficiency is the C-test (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1998). It is a modified version of the Cloze Test based on the same theoretical principle of reduced redundancy. In the C-test, however, the second half of every second word is deleted. The Irish C-Test (ICT), designed for the purposes of the present study, consists of three short texts together requiring 88 restorations. The first and last sentence of each piece of text are left intact.

Students in the Initial Sample filled in a questionnaire which collected background information on self-assessed ability in spoken Irish, use of Irish outside of school and attitude/motivation to learning Irish. The first 70 of the 78 items in the questionnaire correspond closely to items in the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) used by Gardner (1985a; 1985b) but adapted to the Irish learning context. Items relating to three AMTB-based scales - Attitude to Learning Irish, Irish Class Anxiety and Parental Encouragement were randomly presented followed by a seven-point Likert response format (Likert, 1932) ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. Twenty multiple-choice type items represent the two remaining motivation scales - Motivational Intensity and Desire to Learn Irish. Together with Attitude to Learning Irish these two scales give an overall index of student motivation in relation to learning Irish. 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 measure of Irish Course Evaluation is composed of four course-related factors: Utility, Evaluation, Interest and Difficulty. In the last section of the questionnaire, information was sought on student self-assessed ability in spoken Irish and use of Irish outside of school.

At Time 2, a short Participant’s Questionnaire was administered to the Final Sample, seeking information on participants’ current self-assessed ability to speak Irish and on their use of Irish since leaving secondary school. Six relevant items from the Desire to Learn Irish scale administered at Time 1 were also included and combined form a reduced Desire to Learn Irish scale. The last few items of this questionnaire elicited participants’ 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.

Reliability statistics were computed for all three Irish language tests as well as for the various attitude/motivation scales in the Student Questionnaire. The results showed that the reliability coefficients for attitude/motivation scales were acceptable and compared favourably with comparable scales used in other second-language learning studies. Classical item analyses and Rasch models were used to estimate reliability of the language tests. While item analysis showed that the short listening test was slightly too easy for the majority of the sample tested, it was deemed to be an adequate fit in terms of the Rash model. The speaking test which contained more items (mainly scaled items) was associated with a wider distribution of scores and had high reliability estimates. Both the researcher and the corrector independently rated a sample of ten speaking tests in order to establish inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater reliability coefficient found was high \((\alpha = .9)\). The indices of reliability for items in the Irish C-Test were also adequate.
Overall, scores on each of the three tests were found to correlate significantly with each other, as well as with overall Irish grade achieved in the Leaving Certificate Examination. Such correlations are indicative of good ‘construct’ or ‘convergent’ validity of the tests i.e. the tests correlate with measures with which they should correlate, if the underlying construct is correct (Gardner, 1985a).

More details of the instruments and their administration can be found in Chapter 3 (see section 3.3).

6.3 Attitude/motivation, use and proficiency in Initial Sample

6.3.1 Irish Attitude/Motivation and use of Irish

In general, the responses to the Student Questionnaire items indicate that while students were not negative towards Irish neither did they invest great personal effort in learning it. In addition, students considered the Irish course to be above average in terms of difficulty and seemed to be motivated more by the utilitarian value of studying the course rather than by the inherent interest or appeal of the course itself. Attitudes varied greatly, however, according to Instructional Category. The most positive attitudes to learning Irish and to the Irish course, as well as the least anxiety in the Irish class, are associated with students in ‘all-Irish’ school classes while the least positive attitudes and most anxiety is associated with those studying Ordinary Level Irish in ‘ordinary’ schools (Instructional Category 1). Instructional Category 3 (‘all-Irish’ school) students were also likely to receive higher levels of parental encouragement than other students while, in general, Instructional Category 1 students received the lowest levels of parental encouragement.

Many of the attitude/motivation variables are closely related to each other. The more positive students’ attitude to learning Irish, the higher also their actual commitment to speaking it. Such motivational factors are strongly related to the students’ overall evaluation of the Irish Course: the higher they rated the course, the higher also was their motivation to learn Irish. Furthermore, lower levels of anxiety in the Irish class are associated with higher overall motivation to learning the language and greater use of the language outside of school.

Immersion school (Instructional Category 3) students have one other important advantage over their peers in ‘ordinary’ schools which relates to general opportunity to use the language for real communication not only inside but also outside of the school. The results of this study show that three quarters of Instructional Category 3 students reported substantial opportunity (‘quite a bit’/’a great amount’) to speak Irish outside school. The corresponding proportions for Instructional Categories 1 & 2 were much lower - 20.1% and 4.3% respectively. A slightly higher proportion of Instructional Category 3 students (18%) than of Instructional Category 2 or Instructional Category 1 students (14.3 & 12.7%) listed home use of Irish. And while 40% of Instructional Category 3 students reported using Irish with friends who ‘speak Irish or who are interested in Irish’, the corresponding percentages in Instructional Category 2 and Instructional Category 1 were 10% and 4% respectively. A similar pattern was observed in the subcategories ‘Socialising with Friends’ or ‘Irish-Speaking
family/relatives’). In fact, only ‘all-Irish’ school students (24%) listed the former as a situation where Irish was used. ‘Ordinary’ school students, especially those in Instructional Category 1 (20%), were more likely to report that they used the ‘occasional Irish word/phrase’ with family or friends and often just for fun. Extra-school use of Irish among Instructional Category 2 students was higher than among their Instructional Category 1 counterparts and mainly involved contact with Irish through attending summer courses in the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking areas), watching Irish language TV or using Irish as a secret code e.g. when on holidays abroad.

Contact with Irish via the media was relatively high overall but highest among immersion students. One fifth of Instructional Category 3 students reported watching Irish language TV programmes or listening to radio programmes in Irish ‘as often as possible’ while a further three quarters did so ‘sometimes’. While use of this type is lowest among ‘ordinary’ school students, 71% of Instructional Category 2 and 47% of Instructional Category 1, nevertheless, reported that they watched/listened to such programmes at least ‘sometimes’. Just over one-fifth of students in Instructional Categories 2 and 3 reported reading Irish magazines and newspapers as often as they could while only one student in Instructional Category 1 reported an equivalent level of use.

Taken overall, the data demonstrated a direct link between Instructional Category and the extent to which Irish was used outside of the school. Specifically, immersion (‘all-Irish’ school) students used Irish in a greater variety of social situations and were more likely to have access to or to seek out Irish-speaking networks than students in ‘ordinary’ schools. And within ‘ordinary’ schools, those studying Higher Level Irish in the Leaving Certificate programme had more contact with the language outside of the school than students taking the Ordinary Level Irish course. Finally, it must be pointed out that while these results relate to the Initial Sample of students, the pattern of attitude/motivation and use observed was also representative of the sub-sample of students (Target Sample) who were targeted for the follow-up study (see section 4.2.2).

6.3.2 Achievement in Irish at Time 1 and background variables

Overall, students in the Initial Sample performed well on the Irish language tests. Looking first at C-test results, it was found that, on average, students got 62% of items correct. However, there were large differences between average performance in the three instructional categories: the mean C-test scores for Instructional Categories 1, 2 and 3 were 34.5, 67.6 and 86.3 respectively. It was noted also that Instructional Category 1 students were most likely to leave blanks rather than attempt restorations in the C-test.

The listening test proved to be relatively easy for most students. A mean ‘listening’ score of 26.9 (out of a possible total of 34) was recorded with a standard deviation of 4.4. Nonetheless, there were significant differences between the groups. In general, Instructional Category 3 students scored highest (with a mean score of 30.5) followed by Instructional Category 2 students (28.3) while Instructional Category 1 students scored lowest (21.7).
Results for the speaking test, administered only to the Target Sample, showed an overall mean score of 43 for students out of the maximum 66 marks carried by the test. Again, there was evidence of a strong significant relationship between achievement and Instructional Category. The mean scores on the speaking test for Instructional Categories 1, 2 and 3 were 41.1, 71.1 and 84.9 respectively. The same pattern of achievement is seen in the case of all six subtests. Despite the strong relationship, there are many individual cases in which Instructional Category 2 students score higher than Instructional Category 3 students and to a lesser extent cases where Instructional Category 1 students score as well if not better than some Instructional Category 2 students.

Students’ scores on the above tests (Speaking and C-test in particular) correlated strongly and significantly with their grades on the Irish paper in the Leaving Certificate Examination (grade measured in terms of the number of college entry ‘points’ awarded for that grade). For example, in the Target Sample, Speaking Test and Irish C-Test scores had Pearson $r$ values > .9 with Irish grade points received in the examination. There was also a small but significant tendency for female students in the study to have higher C-test scores than male students. No gender differences were found, however, on the overall Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish (listening and speaking tests combined).

Students’ self-assessed ability to speak Irish ratings correlated strongly with actual achievement as measured by the three Irish tests and, in particular, with scores on the speaking test. Distinct patterns are found across instructional categories in the ways in which students rate their own ability to speak Irish. Data from the Student Questionnaire had shown that the great majority (84.3%) of ‘all-Irish’ school (Instructional Category 3) students considered themselves to have native-like ability. Instructional Category 2 students were more likely to rate themselves at the level of ‘most conversations’ or ‘parts of conversations’ while Instructional Category 1 students generally rated themselves at the level of ‘parts of conversations’ or being able to speak just ‘a few simple sentences’. Kavanagh (1999) reported similar differences between immersion and ‘ordinary’ school Leaving Certificate students in terms of self assessed ability in spoken Irish (see section 1.6).

The overall index of student motivation to learn Irish at Time 1 (Motivation Index) is significantly correlated with student achievement on the Irish tests at that time. The results show that, in general, the higher the student’s motivation, the higher also is her/his score on each of the three tests. Likewise, higher parental encouragement in relation to their children learning Irish is associated with higher student achievement, in particular speaking scores.

Correlations involving student Irish Class Anxiety and achievement on each of the three tests are all significant. In general, the higher the level of anxiety reported, the lower that student’s overall achievement score. Again, the relationship is strongest in the case of speaking scores.

Another significant correlation which is worth noting is that involving Irish Class Anxiety and Gender. The relationship shows that female students reported significantly higher levels of anxiety in relation to the Irish class than male students. The earlier finding that females’ general proficiency in Irish (C-test scores) was higher...
than that of males suggests that the relationship between gender and anxiety in the Irish lesson is likely to be independent of that between proficiency in Irish and Irish Class Anxiety.

It has already been established that not only is Instructional Category strongly linked to achievement in Irish but it is also linked with attitudinal and use variables. Furthermore, attitude and use measures are also intercorrelated. The complexity of such interrelationships between background independent variables can be disentangled somewhat by using multiple regression analyses. The latter procedure can assess the relative effect of each independent variable on achievement by controlling for redundancy between them. The same hierarchical regression model (eight independent variables) was used to predict Irish C-test scores and total score on the Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish (see section 4.9). The results revealed some small differences in the relative importance of predictors in relation to the two achievement variables. The dominance of the class level variable Instructional Category in predicting both general proficiency in Irish as well as achievement in spoken Irish is confirmed. Both sets of analyses show that Instructional Category explains approximately two-thirds of the variance ($R^2$) in both C-test and Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish scores.

The significance of each of the other independent factors varies according to the criterion score being predicted. Gender explains a significant proportion of variance (3.5%) in the case of C-test scores only. In general, the results indicate that achievement in spoken Irish is more sensitive to use of Irish outside of school than is general proficiency in Irish as measured by the C-test. Specifically, Opportunity to Speak Irish outside of school is a significant predictor in the case of both dependent variables but accounts for much more of the variance in TPSI scores (5%) than in C-test scores (1%). Parental Encouragement and Use of Irish in the Home variables also make additional and significant contributions (2%) to variance explained in spoken Irish scores when entered into the regression model. However, their overall impact is reduced when all other predictors are included. Irish Class Anxiety accounts for an additional 3-4% of variance in the case of both sets of achievement scores. Finally, students’ evaluation of the Irish course which was entered last in the model makes no additional significant contribution in the case of either dependent variable.

6.3.3 Conclusions from the first phase of the study

While the overall success of students on the three Irish language tests was relatively high, it must be remembered that the Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish was based on communicative objectives common to the Ordinary and Higher Level courses in Irish. Thus, for Instructional Category 2 and Instructional Category 3 students it would be considered to be a rather easy test. The findings showed that the listening test was indeed quite easy for most students but the speaking test was more challenging. In particular, those tasks involving communicative functions which required candidates to give simple opinions or simple instructions in Irish were found to be most difficult and particularly in the case of Ordinary Level Irish students.

Other studies of achievement in Irish have shown that general academic ability is a very important determinant of overall success in learning Irish (Harris & Murtagh,
1988b, 1999; Hickey, 1997). There is some limited evidence from the present study also that overall academic ability affects the choice of Ordinary versus Higher Level Irish. Using the available data, it was shown that the overall number of college entry ‘points’ attained was lower for Ordinary Level Irish (Instructional Category 1) students than for students in either of the other two instructional categories in the Initial Sample. In addition, eight of the ten Instructional Category 1 participants in the Final Sample reported that they would have found the Higher Level Irish course too difficult.

As pointed out in section 1.7.4, students who are about to complete their secondary education in Ireland will by that time have received approximately 1,450 school hours of Irish instruction. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education in Canada’s three levels of expected competence, such exposure would place these students only at a ‘basic’ level of competence, possessing “a fundamental knowledge of the language, the ability to participate in simple conversations, the ability to read simple texts and the ability to resume the study of the second language in later life” (Swain, 1981: 490). The results of the present study suggest that the majority of Leaving Certificate students have achieved such a basic level of competence in Irish. However, the low scores of many Ordinary Level Irish (Instructional Category 1) students on the speaking test indicate that they are not capable of participating in fairly simple conversations in Irish.

At another level, the findings show that the aims of the Leaving Certificate programme in respect of expected levels of spoken Irish can be seen only as having been achieved in the case of immersion (‘all-Irish’) school students, practically all of whom achieve high scores on the speaking test in Irish (mean percentage score=86%). Higher Level Irish students in ‘ordinary’ schools also attain reasonably high speaking scores (mean percentage score=71%) but the range of achievement is greater in this group. It will be recalled from Chapter 1 (section 1.7.2) that Higher Level Irish students are, on completion of the Leaving Certificate course, expected to understand and to speak Irish at a sufficiently high level to be able to confidently participate in general social interaction in the Irish language. While this aim seems to be achievable for immersion students, it may only be realistic for a minority of Instructional Category 2 students and, in particular, for those who have the opportunity to use the language in meaningful situations outside of the Irish classroom and the school.

Given the limited number of contact hours with Irish at secondary level and the broad nature of the course which includes prescribed works of prose and poetry, the level of success in Irish attained by ‘ordinary’ school Leaving Certificate students may be a realistic reflection of what is attainable in such circumstances. However, there are some indications that even when Instructional Category is taken into account, aspects of discomfort in the language learning situation (Irish Class Anxiety) may cause some individuals to underachieve in spoken Irish in particular. Whether this discomfort is due to lack of proficiency or practice in speaking the language or to some general learning anxiety is difficult to ascertain. The results do show, however, an inverse relationship between achievement and anxiety.

Mean ratings on the Irish Course Evaluation scale in the Student Questionnaire indicated that Instructional Category 1 students were more likely than other students in
the Initial Sample to rate their Irish course as being difficult and to be low in terms of interest. The results also suggest that, in general, students’ self-perceptions of low proficiency in spoken Irish may impact negatively on their general interest and motivation in learning Irish. In order to prevent the vicious circle of low motivation, low interest and low proficiency in Irish, it is essential that the provision of inherently interesting, relevant yet pedagogically appropriate, tasks and materials remains a priority of course design and implementation, particularly in relation to those senior-cycle secondary school students who currently feel demoralised or demotivated in relation to learning Irish.

6.4 Retention of Irish skills among secondary school leavers

The findings of the second phase of the study allow us to draw some conclusions relating to the primary issue of interest i.e. whether some significant attrition of Irish skills had occurred in the eighteen month time interval since formal instruction in Irish ceased or if participants managed to retain skills during this period. First, it will be useful to look at the sample of participants who participated in the follow-up study.

6.4.1 Background information on the Final Sample

The Final Sample of participants from the three instructional backgrounds who participated in the longitudinal study (phase 2) could be said to have had a somewhat more positive profile in relation to Irish than the rest of participants in the Initial Sample in phase 1 of the study. The former showed significantly higher achievement in Irish, had lower average Irish class anxiety ratings and tended to have more contact with Irish outside of school. The overall Irish ‘motivation index’ in the two groups, however, was not significantly different. It could be argued, therefore, that aspects of confidence and competence in spoken Irish may have influenced Target Sample members’ decisions regarding participation at Time 2. Self-perceptions of low proficiency in spoken Irish among Instructional Category 1 individuals in particular may have deterred them from participating even though it was explained that ability was not important and there was a monetary reward for participating at Time 2. The fact that some of Instructional Category 1 individuals in the Target Sample went into direct employment may also explain their overall higher level of non-participation.

Reflecting back on the experience of having learned Irish at school, over two-thirds of the Final Sample felt that the Irish course had helped them attain a satisfactory level of competence in Irish. However, very few (and none of Instructional Category 1) agreed that they had actually enjoyed the course. Time 1 data showed that the more highly students evaluated the Irish course, the higher also was their motivation to learn Irish at that time. Love of the language itself and the likelihood of getting a good grade in the Leaving Certificate Examination were among the main reasons why Instructional Category 2 (and Instructional Category 3) participants in the Final Sample opted for the Higher Level course in Irish in the Leaving Certificate programme. Instructional Category 1 participants’ motives for choosing their course were somewhat different: the majority reported that they chose the Ordinary Level
course mainly because they perceived the Higher Level course as being too difficult. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that three quarters of the Final Sample feel that with the passage of time they will come to appreciate more fully the Irish they learned while at school.

The findings also showed that while at school Instructional Category 3 participants had an overall advantage over other participants in the Final Sample in terms of their informal contact with the Irish language outside school. They used Irish more frequently in social situations outside of school and received higher levels of parental encouragement in relation to learning Irish. Given these advantages it is not surprising that these Instructional Category 3 participants demonstrated higher levels of motivation in learning Irish and lower levels of Irish-class anxiety than their counterparts in ‘ordinary’ schools at that time.

A comparison of Final Sample participants’ self-ratings of spoken Irish at Time 1 and Time 2 indicated that a significant number perceived a decline in their level of proficiency in spoken Irish in the eighteen months since they left secondary school. This is not surprising given that they are no longer studying the language and that according to their own reports their use of Irish has also diminished. On the positive side, the small increase over time in exposure to Irish in the broadcast media suggests some effort by participants to maintain contact with the language. At Time 2, over three-quarters of the Final Sample still watch TV programmes in Irish in some form at least while 46% listen to radio programmes in Irish. Such passive contact greatly outweighs more active contact with the language such as speaking and reading in Irish. For participants from Instructional Category 1 and Instructional Category 2, reading in Irish since leaving school typically involves very simple texts (notices, etc) while any spoken Irish they use generally involves just a token Irish word or phrase in English conversation. Participants from Instructional Category 3 background are the most likely to continue to speak Irish, to read Irish and to write in Irish. Once again, these participants’ access to Irish-speaking networks emerges as a factor in facilitating such use. Just over a half of them report that they use Irish with Irish speaking friends while about a quarter write letters or send e-mails to friends in Irish. The evidence for more extensive Irish reading among participants in Instructional Category 3 shows that about a half read Irish articles in national or Irish language newspapers compared to less than 20% of participants in the other instructional categories. None of the latter group and only two of those who had attended an ‘all-Irish’ school (Instructional Category 3) report that they still read literary texts (e.g. short stories, novels). Since leaving secondary school most participants from Instructional Category 1 do not read any Irish while about a half of those from Instructional Category 2 only read short functional texts such as the those found in notices, posters etc. Finally, despite the generally frequent use of spoken Irish among the eleven Instructional Category 3 participants, Irish is only used frequently in two of these ex-immersion students’ homes.

6.4.2 Assessing change in achievement over time in the Final Sample

In general, participants’ self-perceptions of a decline in spoken Irish ability since Time 1 is not supported by the test data. Statistical tests (t-tests) indicate that achievement in
spoken Irish (as measured by the Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish) for the group as a whole did not change significantly in the eighteen months since they finished studying Irish at school. Only in the case of one speaking subtest was there any indication of a significant, if small, change. This involved an overall gain in scores on the ‘Tell a Story’ subtest, an increase which occurred mainly among Instructional Category 3 participants (i.e. those who had attended an ‘all-Irish’ medium secondary school). A separate analysis of ‘Grammatical Accuracy’ measured over three speaking tasks also failed to show any significant change in participants’ general level of grammatical competence in Irish during the time interval. T-tests comparing Irish C-Test scores at Time 1 and Time 2 also failed to show any significant level of change in students’ general proficiency in Irish.

To summarise, the hypothesis that no significant change occurs in spoken and general Irish skills eighteen months after formal learning of the language ceases is upheld by the findings in the present study. Stated otherwise, ‘Time’ as a factor did not exert any overall significant change on the sample’s proficiency in Irish though there were some individual exceptions. A short qualitative analysis described below examines such small gains and losses in individual scores.

6.4.3 Significant factors in maintenance of Irish

Correlation data show that many of the background factors which were related to achievement at Time 1 are also related to performance on the same tests at Time 2. These include the indices of parental encouragement, student motivation in learning Irish, general evaluation of the Irish course and anxiety in the Irish class. Opportunity to use Irish generally since leaving school is significantly related to scores on the Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish at Time 2 but not to Irish C-test scores at that time. Use of Irish in the home was minimal in the Final Sample and was not related to achievement. It will be recalled, however, that reported opportunity to speak Irish (outside of school) has declined significantly in this group from Time 1 to Time 2. While 30.5% of Final Sample participants reported substantial opportunity (‘quite a bit/a great amount’) to speak Irish outside school at Time 1, the ‘corresponding’ proportion at Time 2 had dropped to 11.9%. Significantly, the correlation data indicate that ‘Opportunity to Speak Irish’ at Time 2 is still important for the maintenance of spoken Irish. The more specific indicators of current use of Irish for listening and speaking (see section 5.5.3) since leaving school support this latter connection with achievement (Pearson r values ranges from .37 to .48). Irish reading activity is also linked to higher general proficiency (C-test score) and speaking proficiency (TPSI score) at Time 2 but writing in Irish is only linked with higher C-test scores at Time 2. It will be recalled here that over two-thirds of the Final Sample report that they have ‘never’ written in Irish since completing their secondary education.

The regression analyses can be seen as a more conservative estimate of the extent to which background factors influence actual achievement in Irish at Time 2. The analyses estimate the unique contribution of these factors after having controlled for initial proficiency (Time 1 achievement scores). Due to the small number of cases in the Final Sample, the number of predictors was kept to a minimum. The results of these analyses show that, as expected, initial proficiency in Irish explains most
variance (86%) in Time 2 spoken Irish scores. Nonetheless, Instructional Category still remains a significant factor in explaining achievement in spoken Irish, explaining 2.9% of additional variance. The superior performance of Instructional Category 3 (ex-immersion school) participants relative to those in the other two categories reflects not only their higher scores generally but also the small gains made by some participants in this category. None of the independent variables, Gender, Opportunity to Speak Irish since leaving school, Use of Irish for Listening at Time 2 or Parental Encouragement at Time 1, emerged as significant predictors of achievement in the regression analysis. It should also be noted that an index of motivation in relation to maintaining Irish which was represented by the participant's score on a reduced form of the Desire to Learn Irish scale (see section 3.3.5) was not found to be significant in predicting achievement at Time 2.

As expected, initial proficiency on the C-test (Time 1) also accounts for most of the variance in C-tests scores (86%) at Time 2. However, Instructional Category just fell short of making a significant effect. Apart from initial proficiency, a variable representing extent of Irish reading since leaving secondary school was the only other significant predictor of performance on the C-test at Time 2 - explaining an additional 2% of the variance. This finding demonstrates the potential which reading in the target language has in helping individuals to maintain high levels of general proficiency in a second language such as Irish.

6.4.4 A qualitative analysis of participants’ comments and profiles

In a short qualitative analysis, participants' comments after testing were examined and together with other individual background characteristics yielded some valuable insights in relation to both their test performance and the processing difficulties which they experienced while doing the tests. It should be noted that though this brief analysis was not envisaged in the initial study design it complements the quantitative data by confirming patterns which emerged in statistical analyses and suggests potential explanations for trends noted.

It will be recalled that the results of quantitative analyses showed that, in general, Instructional Category 3 participants made some slight ‘gains’ on the Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish. The participants’ profiles confirmed these findings but also showed that their increased performance may be attributed, in part at least, to their high levels of use of spoken Irish in the meantime. Crosstabulations had shown that over a half of Instructional Category 3 (54.5%) participants still use Irish with family or friends (compared to 15.8% in Instructional Category 2). They are also more likely to report speaking Irish in other social domains e.g. meeting teachers from their old school or in an Irish club (23%). It is worth pointing out that access to Irish speakers is likely to be a critical factor in determining use in these cases. It should be noted also that not all participants with an immersion (‘all-Irish’) school background continued to use Irish regularly: two of the eleven participants from Instructional Category 3 reported that they hardly ever use Irish anymore. Nevertheless, only one individual in Instructional Category 3 showed an overall drop in scores.

It will be noted that ‘gains’ in spoken Irish scores are not always associated with more exposure to Irish. One male participant from Instructional Category 1 made a
significant gain on the Test of Proficiency in Spoken Irish without having had practically any contact with the language in the intervening time. Other background information suggests that low motivation or interest in relation to Irish at Time 1 may have caused him to underachieve at initial testing. It should also be mentioned that the phenomenon of ‘regression to the mean’ is unlikely to explain gain in scores. If ‘regression to the mean’ occurs it means that observed change is not real change but is due to the unreliability of test measures. This possibility can be eliminated in the case of the present study because the reliability of the tests and scales used was quite high (see section 3.3).

The qualitative analysis also demonstrates how participants’ introspective reports in relation to their own performance can help explain changes in scores. It was noted that the two participants who complained of interference from a third language actually showed a ‘substantial’ fall in spoken Irish scores. It was also observed that learning a third language was not always associated with a fall in achievement. However, where this happened a high level of initial proficiency in Irish may have made performance more immune to interference. In terms of ‘attrition’ theory they may have reached a critical threshold (Pan & Berko-Gleason, 1986) in terms of proficiency in Irish (see section 2.4.2).

Many participants’ comments also indicated that they believed their performance on the tests had disimproved even though actual test results did not support this. Moreover, those who reported having no difficulties generally made gains on the test. All of this supports the notion that participants tended to underestimate their ability. However, it will be argued later that participants’ reports of ‘word-finding’ difficulties or feelings of being ‘rusty’ with regard to Irish may be valid indicators of slowed down processing.

6.4.5 Conclusions from the second phase of the study

The present study has found no evidence that attrition of Irish skills occurs during the eighteen months after final year students leave secondary school. Neither has it been possible to draw any firm conclusions about attrition and level of training or, what is called here, instructional background in Irish. However, differences in some individual scores have been noted and the qualitative analysis has shed some further light on these.

There was a small number of participants, generally ex-immersion students (Instructional Category 3) whose continued use of the language for real communication was associated with an apparent increase in proficiency in Irish. A few other participants whose scores in spoken Irish also improved had practically no contact with the language since leaving school, indicating that they underachieved at Time 1. Their profiles suggest that some other individual factors may have changed in the meantime. They appeared more self confident and less anxious than at Time 1. It may be argued that free from the pressures of an imminent Leaving Certificate Examination some participants may have been more focussed or relaxed in their test performance at Time 2. Increased cognitive maturity may also have played a role in the improved communicative ability observed. In the case of the present study it could also be argued that the communicative nature of the Test of Proficiency in Spoken
Irish allows participants to alter their responses, or revise their strategies at Time 2, which may result in improved overall performance. This along with maturational factors may explain the increase in performance of the small number of participants who had little, or no, contact with Irish.

Gains found in Cohen’s (1975) study of second language attrition (see section 2.3.2) was attributed to a phenomenon of ‘additional’ or ‘residual learning’. Cohen suggested that in the case that foreign language learners have to cope with reduced competence and the loss of knowledge of more complex linguistic strategies, they may have to resort to new hypotheses about the use of the second language and consequently make fewer errors in less advanced usage (see also van Els, 1986: 10). A period of non-use may be also be seen as a settling-in process where information becomes more retrievable (Cohen, 1986: 147) and where unlearning of incorrect patterns can take place. However, it must be acknowledged that Cohen’s conclusions were based on retention over a period of a summer vacation only.

Many of the trends emerging from the present study replicate findings from other studies of second language attrition described in Chapter 2. Weltens (1989) found only a little attrition and even some gains (in general listening and reading) while Grendel (1993) found no attrition of lexical recognition skills after four years of non-use. Nonetheless, Weltens also noted participants’ self-reports of vocabulary loss. These two Dutch studies, however, are not directly comparable with the Irish study because the former focussed mainly on loss of receptive skills while the present study assessed integrative listening and speaking skills as well as general proficiency in Irish. The time intervals were also different in both cases. It might be argued that, if the time interval in the present study were longer (e.g. > 2 years), more significant attrition would be found among lower proficiency participants at least. It will be recalled that Bahrick (1984) reported most second language attrition (including recall skills) in his study occurring between 3-5 years after learning of that language ceased.

It is possible that the participants who reported difficulty finding the ‘right’ word in the present study may actually have experienced slowed down processing which could have been identified had a more extensive test of recall of vocabulary items with stricter time restrictions been used. However, the main interest of the present study was how well participants could still understand spoken Irish or speak Irish in simulated naturalistic conditions, in the absence of formal instruction and having little contact with the language. The fact that a number of participants still maintained some contact with Irish may have complicated outcomes somewhat. However, statistical analyses showed that such levels of contact alone did not account for the lack of significant attrition.

Another interesting trend which emerged in the findings was the significance which engaging in Irish reading had on the maintenance of general proficiency in Irish (as measured by the C-test). The role of literacy in the development of academic language proficiency has been stressed by Cummins (2000). Acquiring such decontextualised language skills are considered to assist independent or autonomous learning which will increase the likelihood of language maintenance. Based on her research, Hansen (1999a: 16) also concluded that literacy is important in the area of second language retention as it helps to “anchor linguistic knowledge” (see section 2.5.2).
6.5 Implications of findings for Irish language teaching policies

6.5.1 Establishing clearly defined goals for the language learner

The success of any language teaching policy can only be assessed in terms of its stated goals and objectives. The findings of the present study, though limited in their generalisability, indicate that the overall aim of the Leaving Certificate Irish curriculum in attaining basic communicative skills in Irish is not being achieved for many students in the Ordinary Level Irish programme and even by some in the Higher Level Irish programme in ‘ordinary’ secondary schools. The situation for ‘all-Irish’ (immersion) school students is quite different but as pointed out in section 1.6 of this report they represent a very small proportion of the overall numbers of second level students in the country. The overall aim that Higher Level Irish Leaving Certificate students should be able to speak fluently in all social situations where Irish is used may be somewhat ambitious given that the majority have little contact with the language outside of school and that the amount of Irish instruction they receive at secondary school (approximately 450 hours in total) is only a half of what they receive in primary school. Despite the emphasis on the promotion of spoken Irish skills in the Leaving Certificate Irish programme, the fact that a substantial number of literary works must also be studied means that the kind of conversational practice necessary to consolidate speaking skills already learned and to develop advanced level speaking skills is likely to be limited.

It must be acknowledged that much of the training to promote basic speaking skills in Irish has traditionally been associated with the primary school. Research during the 1980’s, however, showed that only approximately one-third of primary school pupils attained ‘mastery’ of the mainly audiovisual based course objectives in spoken Irish (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a). A new communicatively oriented curriculum has been introduced at primary level within the last few years. One of the main stated aims of this new curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999c) is that the child will be able to use the language to fulfil communicative objectives and have opportunities to use the Irish currently being learned (in class) in everyday Irish language speech situations:

“go mbeadh an páiste in ann úsáid a bhaint as an teanga chun cuspoirí cumarsáide a bhaint amach agus go mbeadh deiseanna aici/aige an Ghaeilge atá á fhoghlaíom a úsáid go rialta i ngnáthchaint an lae’’.

The emphasis on the use of Irish as a living language is central to the philosophy of this new curriculum.

Irish language teaching policy has not generally placed great emphasis on developing a unified programme for the Irish language learner in the school system. Now that communicative methodologies are in place both at primary and secondary level, it seems opportune to articulate the two levels in some formal way under one larger curriculum framework in order to facilitate students at each stage of the learning curve to build upon skills learned at the previous level. This view of successful learning is consistent with Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development in educational psychology where learners, guided by mediators such as teachers, parents etc., move on to the layer of knowledge which is just beyond that
with which they are currently capable of coping. The provision of a wide range of incrementally challenging and interesting tasks or objectives in a structured and supportive environment is, therefore, essential for motivating learners and encouraging them to engage in self-regulated learning. Setting out a clearly defined path of learning goals and objectives so students know what to expect in terms of outcomes is also important in ensuring sufficient levels of intrinsic motivation during the long process of learning Irish.

6.5.2 Course design factors in proficiency and retention

While frequency of use and input are obvious major factors in retention, studies reviewed in Chapter 2 have also shown that initial proficiency is also an important factor in determining the extent to which linguistic skills are retained. Clark and Jorden (1984) have argued that if the goal of language learning is to be lifelong use, then the design of language learning and teaching should focus on reaching the ‘critical threshold’ which is considered to be relatively resistant to attrition. This level may be reached at different rates depending upon the language involved, exposure, as well as some or all of the following non-linguistics factors: course priorities, language aptitude, learner strategies, motivation and perseverance. It will be recalled from Chapter 1 (see section 1.7.4) that the average Irish secondary school leaver may have only received about 1,450 hours of instruction in Irish over their thirteen years of primary and secondary education. This level of exposure alone is unlikely to place them in the high advanced level of competence associated with the critical threshold.

Course designers may need to look at ways of maximising students’ opportunities for speaking practice including the provision of extracurricular activities that would enhance their motivation and confidence to use Irish. Providing an anxiety-free or comfortable environment may be necessary to enable students to more fully explore their own potential in relation to learning Irish. Learners themselves should also be consulted in relation to the design of materials, if such materials are to be accessible, attractive and inherently interesting.

The fact that some individuals seem to be able to maintain language skills, while others with similar learning histories and attrition circumstances lose them, points to the subjective dimension in language retention as well as language learning. Various researchers have already outlined the characteristics and strategies of the ‘good language learner’ (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Nunan, 1999; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Hansen (1999a: 17) believes that similar efforts should be made in identifying the profile of the ‘good language keeper’ i.e. those individuals who are successful in retaining the language. As well as empowering learners with sufficient basic skills it is important to provide them with strategies which will assist them to take charge of their own learning. Thus, promoting self-regulated learning, motivation and autonomy among learners should be important goals in language teaching. Equipped with such self-management strategies, school leavers may be more likely to make social contact with Irish speakers and may feel less intimidated or anxious in real life situations where Irish is spoken. It may be worth noting here that Kavanagh’s (1999: 210) study found that 59% of Leaving Certificate students in five ‘ordinary’
(English medium) schools and 39% of students in five ‘all-Irish’ medium schools did not like to speak Irish with people whom they felt ‘knew it better’.

6.5.3 Participation in the Irish language speech community

The findings in the present study have shown how immersion education is successful not only in producing high levels of competence in Irish but also in introducing students to Irish language-speaking networks which facilitate maintenance of Irish after they leave school. Apart from occasional trips to or courses in the Gaeltacht during school holidays, the opportunity for ordinary school learners of Irish to integrate into Irish language-speaking networks outside of school is minimal. Ó Laoire (2000: 25) argues that only when such integration takes place is Irish language learning “vindicated as being culturally meaningful and communicatively useful”. In a society where the Irish language-speaking community is very thinly distributed outside of Gaeltacht areas, providing opportunities for learners to use Irish outside of the school should be a priority if the new communicative objectives are to be fully realised. If the transmission of Irish to subsequent generations is to be the goal of Irish language teaching policy then it is important that learners do not see Irish only as another academic subject which gains them college entry points. The present study suggests that final year secondary school students are currently strongly motivated by such utilitarian considerations.

Ó Laoire (2000: 26) believes that the central issue in Irish language teaching is “how learning Irish prepares us for participation in the Irish language speech community”. If contacts with Irish language-speaking networks are not established while students are at school it may be problematic for non-fluent speakers to identify and integrate into such communities. Furthermore, Ó Laoire (2000: 28) suggests that “if school is the only place that Irish is meant to be used, then students, when school is out, forget Irish and see it as something irrelevant”. This has been an ongoing problem in Irish language teaching. In 1986, an advisory committee on the State’s national policy in relation to Irish language planning function (An Coiste Comhairleach Pleanála) pointed out that “school generated competence did not find expression in wider societal usage” and concluded that the “disarticulation between the prescribed role of the schools and the status of the language outside the schools was a source of confusion and frustration to pupils, teachers and managers” (Bord na Gaeilge, 1986: viii).

Nonetheless, the present study indicated that the young adults surveyed see Irish as being important in terms of national or cultural identity and believe that as they get older they will appreciate more fully the Irish learned at school. The fact that a majority of participants in the follow-up study reported that they sometimes watched Irish language television programmes suggests that they retain some contact with Irish via a particular type of speech community.

The study has shown that students’ opportunity to use Irish outside of school was significantly associated with higher proficiency in Irish. Seeking ways of providing opportunities for secondary school learners of Irish and graduates of such programmes to use the language they have learned should be a priority in a general Irish language policy which sees the maintenance of Irish as its main aim. Further supports and
resources for ‘ordinary’ schools will be needed, however, if Irish provision is to move beyond the teaching of Irish as subject only and include extracurricular activities to consolidate and build upon school-based Irish instruction. The difficulties for ‘ordinary’ school students in finding opportunities to listen to and to speak the language in authentic contexts can be overcome, in some measure, by access to the Irish language media and the internet. As De Bot and Stoessel (2002: 5) have pointed out, such use of information technology may lead to the creation of a new kind of social network.

Policy makers are aware of the many challenges facing Irish language teaching. Two reviews currently underway in relation to the teaching of Irish at second level reflect the level of concern in this area. These include a Department of Education and Science review of Irish at Junior Certificate Level and a more general review of Irish in the post-primary curriculum by the statutory body - the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). It is hoped that their respective reports may address ways of implementing some of the recommendations outlined earlier.

6.6 Possibilities for further research

Though the study was essentially exploratory in nature, it has been useful in identifying areas for future research in relation to attrition/retention of second language. There are two particular approaches which are envisaged.

First, a similar design may be used on a larger scale ensuring equivalent numbers of participants from the three instructional backgrounds and with just the speaking test being used to assess communicative ability in spoken Irish. It is suggested that, in addition, a test of lexical or morpho-syntactic recall with strict time constraints be administered. This would allow the comparison of oral communicative proficiency with the ability to produce particular vocabulary or grammatical constructions.

Second, as many as possible of the present sample should be tracked and proficiency measured once again approximately two years hence i.e. four years after initial testing. In order to explore the subjective nature of language processing, a standardised and more comprehensive approach to eliciting introspective data from participants in relation to their performance on the tests would be recommended in either study. Furthermore, more detailed information on the level of contact with Irish and possibility of interference from foreign languages should also be gathered.

Finally, attention should be also be given to more specific aspects of attitude and motivation in relation to retention and use. In keeping with the dynamic concept of motivation outlined by Dörnyei (2001) it would be important to design measurement instruments which will be sensitive and powerful enough to capture even small variations in motivational behaviour and to assess their impact on general retention strategies.