1 Background to the study

1.1 Introduction

In general, all school-going children in Ireland study Irish from when they enter primary school until they complete their secondary education. The teaching of Irish continues to be the main way in which the State aims to promote its objective of societal bilingualism. There is little doubt that the inclusion of Irish in the school syllabus has ensured the production of substantial numbers of Irish speakers in society. However, it has been considered much less successful in reproducing sequential generations of bilinguals who use it regularly in society. One of the difficulties lies in the fact that, in the case of the majority of school leavers, Irish, along with many other school subjects, is abandoned once they leave secondary school. Furthermore, the sparse distribution of Irish language-speaking networks outside of the traditional Irish-speaking areas (Gaeltacht) means that those who would like to use the language informally will find few opportunities to do so.

However, as young second level school graduates mature into adulthood, some at least may wish to resume learning the language. This may happen, for example, when they themselves have their own families and wish to help with children’s Irish schoolwork. Or individuals may, for cultural or ideological reasons, wish to continue their study of Irish in one of the widely available Irish classes or courses for adult learners now on offer. In this context, it would be of interest to ascertain how enduring school-acquired Irish language skills can be in a predominantly English-speaking environment. The present research study set out to measure ‘attrition’ or ‘retention’ in young adults’ general and spoken Irish proficiency, eighteen months after they completed the final second level school examination called the Leaving Certificate Examination. As part of the study, information was also collected on a number of background factors which are considered to influence achievement in, and maintenance of, Irish. First, however, a brief outline of the dissertation itself will be presented.

1.2 General outline of the dissertation

To place the study in context, it will be useful in this introductory chapter to present a broad overview of the Irish language in Irish society. A brief history of the Irish language in Ireland is given which traces its use and decline over the centuries, before the State gained its independence and later under the new State’s interventionist policy of language revival. Particular attention is paid to the role of Irish in the educational system and its effectiveness in terms of proficiency levels and attitudes to Irish. This is followed by a short description of the small but growing immersion school movement in Ireland. In order to describe the instructional background of participants who are to be tested in the present study, Chapter 1 concludes with an overview of
Irish in the current Leaving Certificate Programme and Examination as well as assessing the extent of instruction in Irish which students who are about to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination have received since they entered primary school.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background to the study of second language attrition. Three studies which have focussed on the process of attrition in school-learned second languages, and which are considered particularly relevant to the present study of attrition in Irish, will be described in detail. Research studies which support certain theoretical hypotheses regarding the processes of attrition and their linguistic consequences will be also be reviewed. A major issue is how quickly attrition sets in and the effect which individual, social and affective factors have on the rate of attrition. Finally, some methodological considerations concerning second language attrition research are outlined.

Chapter 3 outlines the design and methodology of the study. It describes the participants and the instruments used in the initial study and the follow-up study. The initial study collected general background information on motivation and use of Irish, as well as testing proficiency in Irish among 229 Leaving Certificate students (at Time 1). This information provided baseline data for a sub-sample (n=95) of the initial group, known as the Target Sample, who were suitable for the ‘attrition’ study. In the follow-up study which took place eighteen months after the initial study (Time 2) only 57 of this latter group actually participated. In this Final Sample, proficiency was tested once again with the same language tests as had been used at Time 1 – listening test, speaking test and C-test. In addition some new background information was collected.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the results from phase one and phase two of the study. Chapter 4 describes achievement in Irish, attitude/motivation to learning Irish and use of Irish outside school at Time 1. Reliability indices for the research instruments are also presented. The attitude/motivation instrument shows how positive both the Initial and Target Samples of students were in relation to learning Irish and to the Irish course, as well as giving information on the extent to which they used Irish outside of school. Student achievement is assessed in terms of their performance on the three specially designed Irish proficiency tests: listening, speaking and C-test. Achievement on these measures is related to key attitude/motivation and use variables as well as to students’ instructional background. Multiple regression analyses are used to assess the relative importance of background variables in relation to achievement in Irish.

Chapter 5 describes the longitudinal study. The main focus of this chapter is on the Final Sample of participants and the changes, if any, which occurred in their scores on the three achievement tests since Time 1. Various forms of descriptive and statistical analyses are used to compare and explain proficiency scores. Achievement at Time 2 is also related to key background factors of interest in correlation and regression analyses. Finally, a qualitative analysis helps to elucidate general trends in the data as well as show the importance of subjective or individual factors on performance.

The final chapter of the thesis (Chapter 6) summarises the study in terms of its design and results. It also conducts a critical analysis of the findings, draws conclusions and assesses the implications for the teaching of Irish and for further research in the area.
1.3 The Irish language in Ireland: Historical context

The Irish language (along with English) is the official language of Ireland and is taught in all schools. However, it is only in the traditional Irish speaking areas, collectively known as the Gaeltacht and which account for 2.4% of the total population, that Irish is used widely as a community language. This section gives a short history of the Irish language in Ireland, describing its use and influences from early times, its decline as a common language of the people, and its revival in the new Irish State of the early 20th century. One of the problems for competent adult speakers of Irish today is finding opportunities for using the language which they have acquired. This mismatch between ability and use will be explored by examining evidence from census and survey data.

1.3.1 A short history of the language

Irish is a Celtic language belonging to the same group of Celtic languages as Scots Gaelic and Manx. The earliest extant records of this Gaelic language date from the 4th to the 7th century and are written in a script called ogham in which alphabetic units are represented by strokes and notches marked along the edge of stone monuments. It is thought that even at this time these ogham inscriptions were written in an archaic language which was no longer generally spoken. The advent of Christianity in Ireland in the fifth century brought with it a culture of Christian writing in Latin. The earliest written forms of Irish (‘Old Irish’), using the Roman alphabet and miniscule script of that period, appear as glosses in the epistles of St. Paul now preserved in the library of the University of Wurzburg. Many of the Irish words recorded in such documents have Latin derivations (Ó Mu rchú, 1985: 16). Over the centuries, the Irish script diverged from other European scripts developing its own unique style.

With the coming of the Vikings in the 8th century and the plundering of the monasteries, many of the Irish scholars fled abroad. Thus, the classical period of ‘Old Irish’ came to an end and a less well defined language norm known as ‘Middle Irish’ developed in the period 900-1150 (Greene, 1969: 19). Inflection of the verbal system was simplified and lexical borrowings from Norse, related chiefly to seafaring and fishing, made their way into the language. Extant records include a variety of literature in verse and prose such as legends, historical poems, satires and adaptations of classical epics (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, 1999: 5). The next variety of Irish to appear, ‘Early Modern Irish’, is described as a norm “particularly associated with the secular schools of language and literature which were conducted in the period 1200-1600 by a professional class of literary scholars” (Ó Murchú, 1985: 42). Early varieties of ‘Modern Irish’ emerged in the 16th-17th Century. The political upheavals of this latter period (see below) brought down the Irish aristocracy along with its associated literary class. Writing became more regionalised and the texts of the period began to reflect local spoken norms or dialects.

Though there are a number of varieties of spoken Irish in use today, the three principal ones correspond to the dialects of the Gaeltacht regions. Thus, Munster Irish is the variety spoken by scattered communities in the south and south-west of Ireland. Connacht Irish is spoken by communities in County Galway and County Mayo in the west of Ireland while Ulster Irish is the dialect of communities in County Donegal in
the north-west of Ireland. With the formation of the new State in 1922, and the adoption of Irish as an official language, it became clear that a written standard would be needed to facilitate the new language policy, in particular in relation to official state and legal business. Accordingly, a new official standard grammar (*An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*) was developed. A later revised version was intended to assist teachers and writers generally (Ireland, 1958). Around this time also, the distinctive Irish script was abandoned and replaced by the widely used Roman type.

### 1.3.2 Language shift in Ireland: 11th–20th century

Irish was the dominant language in Ireland up until the 17th century. Following the defeat of the Irish-based Norse at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, the language and culture enjoyed a short period of stability. The Norse invasions had made little impact on the use of Irish other than at the level of some lexical borrowings. The Anglo-Norman invasions of the late 12th century were to be the next major influence in Irish society. During this time new towns were established and old ones expanded. Norman French was introduced but English eventually became the dominant language in the towns. A great number of Anglo-Norman words entered the language, the most common being administrative, legal, military, architectural terms and terms for implements (Ó Murchú, 1985: 22). However, this language shift was to be short lived. Irish soon replaced English in the rural boroughs and the aristocracy remained largely bilingual (English and Irish). The Anglo-Normans were either assimilated or retreated to a small area around Dublin on the east coast.

During the 17th century, a new phase of language shift began and continued until the early 20th century. In a series of plantations, many of the ruling Irish were dispossessed by incoming Tudor monarchs and the land given to native-born English. The Cromwellian plantations of the seventeenth century in Leinster and Munster focussed mainly on securing the main towns, planting them with ‘new English’ settlers. The change to English quickly spread from such towns to the surrounding countryside by way of employment and trade links. Ó Murchú (1985: 25) points out that by the end of the 18th century English had become the sole language of government and public institutions. For most Irish people of the time, especially those in Ulster and Leinster, a knowledge of English was seen as a necessity for advancement. Hindley (1990: 13) highlights the extent of the shift from Irish to English during this time: “for although there were Irish speakers nearly everywhere in 1800…. in almost all the Leinster and Ulster counties the language was no longer in use among the children of the great majority of families”. It would appear that parents from the more socio-economically prosperous areas saw the learning of English as necessary for their children’s progress and survival. In the poorer areas, where fewer chances for social and economic advancement existed, the population was increasing and with it the numbers of Irish speakers.

A census conducted in 1841 showed the population of Ireland to be close to eight million. However, a severe famine from 1845-1849 decimated the population, reducing it by two and a half million people, approximately one million through death and the rest through emigration. The hardest hit areas were the poorer regions on the western seaboard which also contained the largest proportion of Irish speakers. The
first official information on the language spoken in Ireland comes from the 1851 Census of the Population. Based on data reported in this census, it was calculated that approximately 45% of the population had spoken Irish during the last quarter of the eighteenth century but by the time of the census (1851) this percentage had declined to just under 30% (Fitzgerald, 1984). This decline in Irish, the combined result of emigration and desire for economic advancement, continued its downward spiral through the late nineteenth century. The 1891 Census of Population indicated that only 19.2% of what now comprises the Republic of Ireland were Irish speakers at that time. The majority of these were concentrated in two provinces, Munster (south of Ireland) and Connacht (West/North West of Ireland). Only 2% resided in the eastern province of Leinster. An analysis of census data show that the decline in use can also be explained in terms of non-transmission of Irish to the younger generation (Ó Riagáin, 1997: 5). While in 1851, 12.6% of those under ten years of age were Irish speaking, the corresponding proportion in 1891 was just 3.5%. Ó Murchú (1985: 28) believes that “the size of the traditional Irish-speaking community (Gaeltacht) in the 20th century is already determined” in these last figures. It is also worth noting that the distribution of Irish speakers throughout the country has changed radically since the late nineteenth century. As Ó Riagáin (1997: 146) points out, “about 48 per cent of Irish-speakers now live in Leinster (including Dublin) compared with about 5 per cent in 1851”. Such changes can be attributed not only to the growth in population in Dublin city but perhaps more importantly to the impact of school Irish on this sector of the population.

Revival
The struggle for political independence or home rule in the early part of twentieth century in Ireland was accompanied by developments in other intellectual and cultural areas. One of these was the language revival movement. Its main concern was the preservation of the Irish language as an important aspect of Ireland’s heritage. Of all the societies involved in this movement, the Gaelic League set up in 1893 was the most successful as well as ambitious in its aims. Chief amongst these was the revival of Irish and the creation of a new modern literature in Irish. It organised language classes and cultural events throughout the country. In 1900, it succeeded in getting the British administration to allow the Irish language to be taught as a subject in the primary school system (Ó Riagáin, 1997: 9). Training of teachers in Irish commenced in special training colleges. The League also achieved their demand that Irish be an essential requirement for entry to the National University of Ireland.

In 1922, following the War of Independence, an independent Irish State was established with the signing of a treaty with the British Government. (As part of the treaty, the six counties of Northern Ireland remained part of the UK). Under the constitution drawn up for the new State, Irish is described as the national language and English as an equally recognised official language. Thus, a bilingual state was what was envisaged. The 1937 revised Constitution refers to Irish as the ‘first official language’ implying a somewhat higher status for Irish than for English. The Irish education system was seen as main agent through which revival of Irish could be achieved. The next section examines the role which the schools have played in the revival and maintenance of Irish since the formation of the State.
1.4 The schools as a means of promoting Irish

In 1922, all primary schools were instructed to teach Irish, or use it as a medium of instruction for at least a half an hour a day (INTO, 1941). Under the new language policy, it was also recommended that Irish be taught or used as a medium of instruction in all national schools that had a competent teacher. Special training in Irish was provided for teachers. In infant classes, it was intended that all work would be conducted directly through Irish (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 348). In teaching Irish there was a strong emphasis on grammar and composition. According to Ó Laoire (2000: 22) the implicit assumption in this policy was that “if children knew the language they would learn to speak it”.

While primary education was compulsory for all young children (6-14 years), few continued to the post-primary level. Ó Buachalla (1988: 62) points out that in the period following independence “access to education beyond the primary stage outside urban areas, was available only to about 8% of the age group”. In post-primary secondary schools, Irish and English were mandatory subjects from 1927. Irish was a compulsory subject for the two main examinations – the junior level examination (Intermediate Certificate) and the terminal secondary school examination (Leaving Certificate). Extra marks were awarded for those taking their subjects in these examinations through the medium of Irish. As a result of these incentives, the number of schools using Irish as a medium of instruction (‘A’ schools) increased from five in 1925-26 to twenty four in 1930-31 and those teaching some subjects through Irish (‘B’ schools) had risen from ten to sixty eight in the same period (Department of Education, 1932; Ó Buachalla, 1988: 349).

The new language policy was vigorously pursued through the 1930’s and by the early 1940’s, 12% of the primary schools and 28% of the secondary schools in English speaking areas were using Irish as a medium of instruction (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 65). However, there was general unease among teachers and politicians regarding the suitability of Irish-medium education for infant classes in particular. The rule was relaxed in the 1950’s. The general public was also unhappy with other aspects of Irish language policy in the schools. Particularly unpopular was the regulation whereby students who did not pass Irish in the two main state examinations (Intermediate and Leaving Certificate) would not be awarded a certificate i.e. they were regarded as having failed the whole examination. Ó Riagáin (1993: 47) cites evidence from a public opinion poll, conducted in 1964, in which 71% of respondents were unhappy with compulsory Irish in the state examinations while 65% disapproved of the teaching through Irish policy. A study published in the late sixties (Macnamara, 1966) suggesting that Irish medium instruction could have negative academic consequences for some categories of students may also have reinforced public fear regarding the suitability of all-Irish medium education. As resistance to the compulsory aspect of Irish in state examinations mounted, the government finally capitulated and the rule was dropped in 1973.

This period was also marked by a growing dissatisfaction at official levels with the low return of the investment in teaching Irish. Standards were not meeting expectations. A report by Comhairle na Gaeilge (The Irish Language Council)
published in the 1970’s, while acknowledging the high standards in some school, asserted that “in too many other schools, even after 12 years instruction, most pupils emerge unable to conduct a simple conversation in Irish” (Comhairle na Gaeilge, 1974: 3). Various surveys of achievement in Irish at primary level during the 1970’s-1980’s showed that only approximately one-third of the nation’s children, on average, were attaining mastery of the stated listening and speaking objectives of the audio-visual based Irish course which was in use at the time (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a). More generally, effectiveness of the educational programme as the sole means of restoring the language was also being questioned. Referring to Irish language teaching policy of the 1930’s-1960’s, Ó Laoire (2000: 23) remarks on “the growing disjunction between the energies invested in learning the language in the classroom and the absence of opportunities outside it for using it meaningfully in a speech community context”. The absence of any home-school link in school language policy meant that no connection was being made between language skills learned at school and their use in the home-neighbourhood domain (Ó Laoire, 1995: 230).

The radical changes in educational policy which occurred during the 1960’s reflected the general advancement in economic and social planning in Ireland of that period. A new and more coherent educational policy sought to broaden curricular content and to promote equality of educational opportunity. Free travel to school and the establishment of comprehensive and community schools dramatically increased the participation rates in post-primary education between 1960-1970 (Clancy, 2001: 16; Ó Buachalla, 1988: 74). Consequently, the demands on the state educational system continued to grow. This, together with the general dissatisfaction regarding certain aspects of Irish language teaching policy, prompted the State to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the teaching of Irish. The 1960’s saw a rapid decline in the numbers of all-Irish medium schools. While approximately eighty secondary schools were teaching through Irish in 1960, only one quarter of these was still operating by 1970 (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 367). There was an even greater decline at primary level in this ten year period with the number of ‘all-Irish’ schools falling from 183 to 28 (Ó Riagáin, 1997: 201). Thus, there was a general shift in Irish educational policy from promoting bilingual or all-Irish programmes to concentrating resources on the teaching of Irish as a subject.

Alongside this change in policy, there was evidence of declining standards in Irish at second level. Ó Riagáin (1997: 204) claims that from the early seventies through the eighties there was a decline in levels of proficiency in Irish among post-primary school students. Specifically, he points to an increase in the percentages of students not taking Irish in the two second level state examinations as well as growing percentages who failed Irish or who did not take the higher level paper in Irish in the Leaving Certificate Examination. A number of factors may account for these changes. First, the discontinuation of the compulsory Irish requirement for state examinations, entry to the Civil Service and to some third level colleges is likely to have weakened instrumental motivation for learning the language. Second, the higher participation rates at post-primary level generally brought increasing numbers of less academically able students into the senior cycle than before. Third, the fall off in Irish-medium education may also have had a negative effect on overall achievement though the
proportion of schools involved even when at its peak was still only a small minority of the total number of second level schools.

Concerns about failure rates in Irish and suitability of course content for all students was what prompted curriculum reform in Irish during the 1980’s-1990’s. It was hoped that by adopting a new communicative approach (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), as had already happened in the case of modern languages in post-primary schools (Sheils, 1988), Irish would become more accessible and relevant to all students (Ó Laoire, 2000: 26). A new revised curriculum for Leaving Certificate Irish was developed and published in 1995 (Department of Education, 1995a, 1995b). The impact or effectiveness of the new approach has yet to be objectively assessed. Leaving Certificate Examination results in Irish have improved in the last decade - there are fewer students failing and more attaining honours in the subject. However, it will be argued later, that it is difficult to draw any reliable conclusions from these changes (see section 1.7.3 below).

1.5 Ability, use and attitudes to Irish in the adult population

1.5.1 Ability in Irish and use of Irish: Census data

Census data on the Irish language, over the last century and a half, show that the number of Irish speakers has if anything increased in this period. It will be recalled (see section 1.3.2) that in 1891 only 19.2% of the population were classified as Irish speakers. This figure had dropped to 17.6% in the (1911) census preceding independence. Since the formation of the Irish State, the reported percentages of Irish speakers has been growing steadily. The impact of the schools in generating Irish speakers can be seen in the growth in the young adult cohorts of Irish speakers returned in the various censuses in this period. By 1991, 32.5% of the population were returned as Irish speakers. Only 4.6% of the total 3-4 year old cohort, however, were recorded as Irish speakers. As the majority of these children would not be attending school, this percentage is likely to give a more realistic picture of home use of Irish in the general population.

There are, however, a number of difficulties in interpreting census data. There is the problem of defining the level of competence of those returned as Irish speakers which is usually reported by the head of the household. The 1996 census of the population (Central Statistics Office, 1998) suggests a rather dramatic increase (8.6%) in Irish speakers since 1991 – the percentage reported is 41.1%. An explanation may lie in the substantial change in question format from the previous census. The pattern of ability, however, is similar to that found in earlier censuses, with the highest proportion of Irish speakers in the 5-24 age range.

It must also be acknowledged that though an individual is classified as an Irish speaker it does not always follow that she/he will speak the language with any degree of regularity. Responses to a new question on ‘Irish use’ in the 1996 census indicate such a mismatch between ability in Irish and use. While 41.1% of the total population are classified as Irish speakers, only 10.2% of the total population are reported to speak the language ‘daily’ and 3.6% speak it ‘weekly’ (Central Statistics Office, 1998: 56).
Not unexpectedly, frequency of speaking Irish is highest in the school-going population. For example, in the total 10-14 age cohort 36% are reported as speaking Irish ‘daily’. The corresponding percentage drops to 24.2% in the 15-19 age cohort and in the 20-24 age cohort only 2.8% are reported as using the language daily. As most students complete their secondary education at age eighteen, the decline in use begins to show in the 15-19 age cohort. The reported daily use in the 20-24 age group probably best reflects actual use of Irish in society in general – outside of the school situation. From the 1996 census data it can be also be calculated that, of the non-school going population (3-4 years, > 20 years) outside of the Gaeltacht, only 2.2% (54,863) speak Irish on a daily basis. (The corresponding figure for the Gaeltacht is 35% or 20,899 speakers.) The low level of spoken Irish use in the 20-24 age cohort is surprising given that the majority of these individuals would only have ceased to study Irish within a few years of the census. Thus, it appears that once students finish their formal study of Irish at second level, they are no more likely to use the language than the rest of the adult population.

1.5.2 Ability in Irish and use of Irish: Language survey data

A more conservative measure, perhaps, of ability and use in the non-school going population may be found in language survey data collected in the adult population (aged 18 and over) at ten yearly intervals from 1973 to 1993. A ‘speaking ability’ question in each of three surveys (C.I.L.A.R., 1975; Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1984, 1994) asked if respondents knew ‘no Irish’, the ‘odd word’, enough for a ‘few simple sentences’, for ‘parts of conversations’, for ‘most conversations’, or finally, if they regarded themselves as ‘native speakers’. Ó Riagáin (1997: 148) reports that “in each survey, about half of the sample said that they had little or no Irish, about 40 per cent felt that they could manage a few simple sentences or parts of conversations, and just over 10 per cent said they could handle most or all conversational situations”. These data suggest, therefore, that the term ‘Irish speaker’ as used in the census represents individuals with quite varying levels of ability in the language.

Information from the 1993 survey also give some insight into the kinds of difficulties respondents experience in speaking Irish. Of those who reported ability at the level of a ‘few simple sentences’ or ‘parts of conversations’, the most common difficulty reported was ‘finding the right word for special topics’ or ‘thinking quickly enough to keep up with conversations’ (50-70% of respondents). ‘Grammar’ and ‘expressing what you mean’ came next in terms of difficulty (56% & 30% respectively) in both groups. Problems with pronunciation was the least likely to be reported in either ability group (21% & 8%).

Responses to a general item on home use of Irish in the three surveys showed that Irish is used ‘always/often’ (by at least one person) in only between 3-5% of homes. The proportion of adults in the 1993 survey who report speaking Irish ‘frequently’ in the workplace (2-3%) is somewhat similar to the level of reported home use in the population generally (Ó Riagáin, 1997: 163). This survey also provides information on the extent of community or social use of Irish in the country generally. About 6% of the population reported that they ‘often’ attend leisure (Irish music and dance) events where Irish is used while only about 1% or less attend Irish language
associations and clubs where Irish is used. About 20% of the population are reported as attending religious services in Irish ‘at least occasionally’. Regarding Irish reading, only 1-2% of those surveyed read an Irish language newspaper or book ‘daily or a few times weekly’ (93% ‘never’ read them). The percentage reading an Irish column in daily newspapers was just slightly higher: 5% did so at least a ‘few times weekly’.

Contact with Irish via the broadcast media appears to be more frequent than the more active use of Irish described above. In the 1993 survey, 12% of the total sample of respondents reported watching programmes in Irish on TV at least ‘a few times weekly’, while 5% listened to radio programmes in Irish on such a regular basis. Since 1993, the opportunity to watch TV programmes in Irish has increased with the introduction of the new Irish language television channel (TG4). Ó hFearnáin (2001: 27) has reported that, during September to November 2000, this new station registered 2.2% of all viewership in the State. He points out also, however, that viewership of certain Irish language programmes on the established, and predominantly English medium, State channels is much higher (16-26%).

**Instructional level in Irish and ability in Irish**

Language survey data reveal that the higher the instructional level reached in Irish, the higher the respondents rate their own ability in Irish. In the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research 1973 study (C.I.L.A.R., 1975), a national sample of first and sixth-year post primary students in English-speaking areas rated their ability to speak and understand Irish. The results showed that the proportion of sixth years who rated ability at the level of ‘most conversations or better’ was 53% for ‘understanding’ and 43% for ‘speaking’. The corresponding proportions for first year students were 36% and 35% respectively.

The 1993 survey of attitudes and use in the adult population (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994) showed a strong relationship between grade received in Irish in the Leaving Certificate Examination and the respondent’s current ability to speak Irish. Of those who received honours (Grade C or higher on the Higher Level paper) in Leaving Certificate Irish, 53% believed they could still participate in ‘most conversations’. The corresponding proportion for those who got ‘pass’ grades was just 12% and none of those who failed Irish in the Leaving Certificate Examination would rate themselves this high. Self-assessed ability in the 1993 survey was also linked to the general instructional background of respondents. Those who left school at the end of primary school appeared to have retained little Irish: 80% had just the ‘odd word’. Those with post-primary education fared somewhat better but still 60% did not rate their speaking ability higher than ‘a few simple sentences’ and only 11% felt they could partake in ‘most conversations’. For those who had been exposed to Irish-medium instruction the results were much better. Approximately one-third of adults who were taught some subjects through the medium of Irish at school reported ability to speak Irish at the level of ‘most conversations’ or higher while 61% of those who had attended ‘all-Irish’ (immersion) schools rated themselves at this level. Ó Riagáin (1997: 196) concludes that full or partial immersion programmes “appear to have been far more successful in impartment enduring speaking skills” than the regular teaching of Irish as a subject programme.
1.5.3 Attitudes to Irish in the general population

The language surveys described above which were carried out in 1973, 1983 and 1993 consistently showed that the general public placed a high value on Irish as a symbol of ethnicity. The percentages in each survey agreeing with the statement ‘Without Irish, Ireland would certainly lose its identity as a separate culture’ are 56%, 66% and 61% respectively. There was also widespread agreement that ‘to really understand Irish culture, one must know Irish’ (58%; 57%; 46%) though the level of agreement dropped to under one half of the population in the most recent 1993 survey. Furthermore, at least two-thirds in each survey agreed that ‘no real Irish person can be against the revival of Irish’. Ó Riagáin (1997: 191) reports that “there is also majority support for policies to maintain Irish in the Gaeltacht, to provide Irish language services on the national television channels, to use Irish on public notices, to provide State services in Irish and officials who can speak Irish, and to support the voluntary language organisations”. Notwithstanding such levels of support for maintenance of the language, responses to other items reveal a high level of pessimism in relation to the future of Irish. Percentages ranging from 66-71% believe that ‘if nothing is done about it, Irish will disappear in a generation or two’ while somewhat similar percentages (79%; 78%; 65%) think that ‘most people just don’t care one way or the other about Irish’.

Public attitudes to the teaching of Irish

The surveys also show that there is a high level of support for the teaching of Irish to most Irish school children. The proportions agreeing that they would be sorry if Irish children stopped learning Irish at school grew from 63% in 1973 to approximately 75% in the later surveys. A survey of public attitudes to Irish conducted by the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation in the early eighties (INTO, 1985) also found high levels of support (84%) for the inclusion of Irish in the primary school curriculum. However, the 1993 survey (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994) showed that the public was not happy with the effectiveness of Irish language policy in the schools. Over two-thirds of those interviewed agreed with the statements that ‘children seldom learn enough Irish to use it after school’ and that ‘if Irish were taught better in the schools, more people would speak it’. Over a half believed that children ‘resent having to learn Irish’.

It is clear, however, that the majority of adults do not want any change in the type of Irish language programme in place in primary or second level schools. Specifically, between 69-72% of those interviewed in 1983 and 1993 would like to see the current policy of teaching maintained. About 20% favour some teaching through Irish while only 4% favoured full immersion. Responses to another item revealed a stronger level of support for Irish-medium education. Almost a third reported that they would be willing to send their own children to an ‘all-Irish’ primary school and almost a quarter would send them to an ‘all-Irish’ secondary school, if they were located locally. And approximately 70% thought that the government should provide such schools wherever the public wants them (Ó Riagáin, 1997: 180).
A survey of parents’ attitudes to Irish
A survey of parents (Harris & Murtagh, 1999) conducted as part of an in-depth study of the teaching and learning of Irish in twenty senior grade primary school classes, showed that two-thirds of parents described their own attitude to Irish as ‘strongly/somewhat in favour’ while three quarters of parents were ‘strongly/somewhat in favour of their child being taught Irish’. Most parents (83.3%) also agreed that the school was ‘doing everything possible’ to improve their children’s progress in Irish generally (only 14.1% felt it ‘could do more’). However, these positive attitudes regarding Irish, and to the notion of their children learning it, were not matched with high levels of personal commitment to, or involvement in, the actual process of their children learning Irish. It was shown that 70% of parents left it up ‘to the child to develop his/her own attitude’ - only approximately 30% let the child know Irish was very important. Furthermore, praise for the child’s school achievements was less common in the case of Irish than in other school subject areas and parents were more likely to ‘usually help’ their child with mathematics (70%) or English (48%) than with Irish (35%). What is of particular significance in the study is that where active participation on the part of parents was present, in the form of encouragement, praise or help with homework, it was associated with more positive pupil attitudes and higher pupil achievement in Irish.

1.5.4 Attitude/Motivation among school learners of Irish
Gardner and Lambert (1959) were among the first to try to identify the major social and ability factors involved in second language learning. Among a group of high school English-speaking students of French, they identified a language aptitude factor and a social-motivation factor. The latter obtained high loadings with factors such as Attitude towards French Speakers and Motivational Intensity to learn French. Gardner went on to develop the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985a). It has been shown that various aspects of attitude/motivation measured by this instrument correlate strongly with achievement in the target language (Lalonde & Gardner, 1985).

Harris and Murtagh (1999) used an adapted form of the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to assess pupil attitude/motivation in relation to learning Irish at primary school. A full description of this instrument is given in Chapter 3. It was found that the sixth-grade pupils involved in the study had quite positive integrative attitudes in relation to Irish i.e. they were generally well-disposed towards the Irish language itself and towards the idea of integrating with the Irish-language speaking ‘community’ or ‘group’. These integrative attitudes are important because they can help to maintain motivation during the long task of acquiring Irish. In contrast, those aspects of motivation which reflect commitment to actually learning Irish were less positive (e.g. their desire to learn Irish, intensity of the effort which they are prepared to commit to learning Irish). Similar findings had been reported in an earlier study of Irish attitude/motivation in early post-primary classes (Ó Fathaigh, 1991). While the results of that study indicated an overall ‘positive’ attitude to the importance of Irish as an ethnic symbol and to the promotion of bilingualism, less positive attitudes were related to the learning process itself.
One interesting outcome of the Harris and Murtagh (1999) study was the finding that it was the more active aspects of motivation, such as attitude to learning the subject and effort expended in doing so, which seemed to directly affect student achievement in Irish as measured by listening objectives of spoken Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1999: 31). Responses to items from an Irish lesson-anxiety scale in the study showed that roughly one-third of pupils admitted to anxiety, lack of confidence or embarrassment about speaking Irish in class. Correlation data showed that higher levels of Irish-lesson anxiety were associated with significantly lower levels of pupil achievement in Irish. Furthermore, classroom observation data revealed that class groups in which pupils were less likely to speak in Irish during the Irish lesson were associated with higher levels of Irish-lesson anxiety (Harris & Murtagh, 1999: 333).

In a national survey (n=2225) of primary school pupils, Harris and Murtagh (1988a) found that only about 1.2% were reported as using at least some Irish at home. What is significant, however, is that even such moderate levels of home use of Irish have been shown to be associated with higher pupil achievement in the language (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988b, 1999). Data from a Parental Encouragement scale in Harris and Murtagh’s (1999) study indicated that a substantial minority of pupils did not believe that they had the support and encouragement of their parents in the task of learning Irish. Furthermore, both the Use of Irish at Home scale and the Parental Encouragement scale were strong predictors of pupils’ overall Irish attitude/motivation: higher levels of parental encouragement and higher levels of Irish use at home being associated with more positive pupil attitude/motivation.

1.6 Immersion education in Ireland today

It was noted earlier that during the 1960’s the numbers of all-Irish medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht fell quite sharply. By 1972 there were fewer than twenty of these ‘all-Irish’ schools, the majority of which were primary schools. The numbers remained stable for some years but by the early eighties they had doubled once again and the recovery continued into the next decade. By 2000 there were 145 ‘all-Irish’ schools operating outside of the Gaeltacht (114 primary; 31 post-primary) and there are indications that the numbers continue to grow (Gaelscoileanna, 2001). This turnaround was due to the activity of a new ‘all-Irish’ school movement of individuals and parents concerned with the provision of ‘all-Irish’ immersion education. The movement is coordinated by two voluntary grant-aided agencies, one concerned with ‘all-Irish’ primary and post-primary schools (Gaelscoileanna) and the other with ‘all-Irish’ preschools called Naíonraí. The growth in Naíonraí throughout the country is significant as it generates an increasing demand for follow-up ‘all-Irish’ primary education. The number of ‘all-Irish’ second level schools is also slowly increasing. However, they are still not widely enough distributed to be capable of absorbing all of those ‘all-Irish’ primary school leavers who would like to continue their post-primary education through the medium of Irish.

There is a body of evidence showing that ‘all-Irish’ primary school pupils have a much higher level of achievement (Irish reading and spoken Irish) than those in ‘ordinary’ primary schools (Cummins, 1982; Harris, 1984) and as high as their
Retention and attrition of Irish as a second language

counterparts in *Gaeltacht* schools (Harris & Murtagh, 1987). A recent study
(Kavanagh, 1999) which compared final year students in five ‘all-Irish’ secondary
schools in the Dublin area with a matched sample of classes from ‘ordinary’ (English-
medium) schools also showed substantially higher levels of ability in Irish among
immersion students. Specifically, all of the immersion (n=162) students rated their
ability to speak Irish in the high range of ability (most conversation or better) while
only 44% of a matched sample of ‘ordinary’ school students rated their ability this
highly. Junior Certificate results showed that all the immersion students had studied
higher level Irish and 93% received an A or B grade in the examination. In contrast,
less than a half of the ‘ordinary’ school students studied higher level Irish and of those
who sat the higher level paper only 49% received A or B grades (Kavanagh, 1999:
188-89).

As Ó Riagáin (1997: 262) points out, the ‘all-Irish’ school can have “an importance
far beyond its basic aim of educating children through Irish”. For example, two
studies show evidence of a backwash effect in terms of increased use of Irish in the
homes of ‘all-Irish’ school students. A study of ‘all-Irish’ schools in the Dublin area in
1972 (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1979) indicated that approximately seventy percent of
parents (mothers) claimed an increase had occurred in the frequency with which Irish
was used in the home since their child began attending the ‘all-Irish’ school (Ó
Riagáin, 1997: 257). The pattern of home use was highest in conversations with the
child attending the ‘all-Irish’ school. Hickey (1997: 67) also reported an increase in
Irish use in the homes of children attending *Naíonraí* (‘all-Irish’ preschool).

The Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin (1979) study also showed evidence of increased
participation in Irish-speaking networks among parents of ‘all-Irish’ school children,
though the durability of these contacts after children have left the ‘all-Irish’ school
system has yet to be established. Ó Riagáin (1997: 277) claims that such school based
networks appear to have some success in integrating ‘novice’ or ‘reluctant’ bilinguals.
It is this kind of potential for bilingual reproduction within society which may be one
of the most important aspects of all-Irish medium education. It must be kept in mind,
however, that parents in the Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin’s (1979) study had higher social
class ratings, higher levels of education, higher ability in Irish and more positive
attitudes to Irish than the general population. With the expansion of immersion
education generally, and in rural areas in particular, it is possible that the profile of
‘all-Irish’ school parents may be quite different now than it was three decades ago.
There is some evidence (Coady & Ó Laoire, 2002) that the linguistic profile in homes
of all-Irish school students has changed somewhat: less Irish spoken now than in 1974.

For students there are likely to be other more far reaching benefits associated with
immersion education than higher achievement alone. For example, the Kavanagh
(1999) study showed that ‘all-Irish’ school students were much more optimistic
regarding the future of Irish than ‘ordinary’ school students or the public in general.
Two thirds of the ‘all-Irish’ school students interviewed agreed with the statement that
‘Irish can be revived as a common means of communication’ and only 4% agreed with
the statement that ‘Irish is a dead language’. Corresponding percentages for matched
‘ordinary’ school students in that study were 38% and 31% respectively. The latter
figures are close to the percentages agreeing (45% and 31%) with these same two
items in the national population (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). Such feelings of confidence and optimism combined with success in learning the Irish language found among immersion students may be important factors in helping to maintain high levels of motivation in the longer term. It may be worth mentioning that approximately three quarters of the ‘all-Irish’ students in the Kavanagh study also indicated a strong commitment to maintenance of the language in terms of their ‘intention to use Irish in their homes, with any children they may have in the future’ (Kavanagh, 1999: 207). The corresponding proportion for ‘ordinary’ school final year students is much lower (36%) but, nonetheless, suggests a significant level of commitment for non-immersion final year students. The extent to which such aspirational commitment may be realised in practice and the factors facilitating this transformation are the critical issues for intergenerational transmission of Irish skills.

Finally, it must be kept in mind that the present number of ‘all-Irish’ schools still only represent a tiny proportion (3.6%) of the total number of national schools (Department of Education and Science, 2001) and as such are unlikely to have any significant effect on the extent of societal bilingualism. Nevertheless, the positive outcomes emerging from present day immersion programmes must be acknowledged and the fact that the present revival of all-Irish medium education is bottom-up driven, rather than top-down (State) driven, is further grounds for optimism in relation to its capacity to endure over time.

1.7 Irish in the Leaving Certificate Programme

Current policy requires that all students study Irish as a subject in second-level schools (with a few exceptions). Exemptions are granted in a small number of cases e.g. pupils with learning disabilities or those whose primary education was received outside of Ireland\(^1\). There are two main stages in secondary education in Ireland (i) the Junior Cycle and (ii) the Senior cycle. Students sit an examination called the Junior Certificate Examination at the end of the three year junior cycle. Some schools may decide that all or some of its students follow a Transition Year Programme before entering the two year Leaving Certificate Programme which terminates with the Leaving Certificate Examination. In the first year of the present study there were 730 second level schools offering the Leaving Certificate Programme (Department of Education and Science, 2001).

1.7.1 The established Leaving Certificate Programme and Examination

The established Leaving Certificate Programme aims to prepare students for “immediate entry into open society or for proceeding to further education” (Department of Education and Science, 1999a). Students must study at least five subjects one of which must be Irish. Most subjects are offered at two levels – Higher and Ordinary. However, in order to accommodate weaker ability students, Irish and Mathematics are also offered at Foundation Level. The Leaving Certificate

\(^1\) For more details on exemptions see Department of Education and Science, 1999a & Circular Letter M10/94
Examination is the final examination for secondary education. Because of the high standards set in the examination, it is recommended that students not be presented in more than seven subjects. Candidates who sit the examination are awarded a certificate of the grades achieved in their chosen subjects. For a minority of post-primary students, the Leaving Certificate Examination marks the end of their formal education. However, this is an ever diminishing proportion. The growth in the number of Post Leaving Certificate courses and courses in new Colleges of Technology means that few second level graduates go directly into employment.

The Points System

The Leaving Certificate Examination is intended mainly as a test of achievement and is not designed to be used for selection purposes. In practice, however, the certificate of results is used as evidence of a student’s suitability for entry to third level education or employment. Places in third level institutions are in many cases awarded solely on the basis of Leaving Certificate grades obtained. Where demand exceeds the number of places available, the student’s examination results are reduced to a single ‘points’ score by the Central Applications Office (CAO). This is calculated by giving a set number of points for each grade and then adding the six best values to get a ‘points’ total. The table in Appendix A shows how points are calculated for grades at Higher Level and at Ordinary Level. It should be noted that Foundation Level subjects are not awarded any points. Students are ranked according to their ‘points’ scores and the available course places are filled by the CAO from the top of this ranked list. Attaining the best ‘points score’ possible has become a preoccupation for Leaving Certificate candidates and the scramble for places in courses based on this score is familiarly known as the ‘points race’. Whatever the merits or otherwise of the ‘points system’ it has become an important feature in the life of Leaving Certificate students.

1.7.2 The Leaving Certificate Course in Irish

At present, there are three course levels or Irish syllabuses which a student can take for the established Leaving Certificate programme - Foundation Level (Bonnleibhéal), Ordinary Level (Gnáthleibhéal) and Higher Level (Ardleibhéal). We will now look briefly at the content of the relevant syllabus for each of these three levels.

The Leaving Certificate Foundation Level course in Irish is aimed at students of low ability in Irish and is selected by about ten percent of Leaving Certificate candidates. The aim is to develop basic communicative skills in Irish, receptive skills in particular. Students are expected to be able to understand simple speech and to participate in simple conversations. Basic functional reading and writing skills are emphasised. There is little, if any, emphasis on Irish literature though the course is intended to develop a general awareness of the language, Irish culture and traditions.

In the Leaving Certificate Ordinary Level Irish syllabus, the main teaching objectives are (i) understanding speech, written text and literature, (ii) developing spoken Irish skills in relation to listed topics, (iii) writing in Irish (letters, stories, accounts) and (iv) reading and appreciating a selection of Irish prose and poetry. A wider variety of communicative functions and topics are listed than in the case of Foundation Level. The course is designed to integrate aspects of Irish culture with the
language skills that are being taught. Awareness of the structure of Irish and its similarity with other languages the student is studying is seen as part of the language awareness dimension. Learning strategies are also emphasised. There are five prescribed pieces of prose and five poems in Irish which must be studied at this level. Books regarded as having subject matter which is enjoyable and relevant to students' own lives are selected. The books change every three years. The poems selected are usually those by modern poets and the topics are intended to relate in some way to syllabus topics. As well as these prescribed works, it is recommended that teachers select other suitable works of prose and poetry to use with students.

The Leaving Certificate Higher Level Irish course is aimed at two types of Irish language student. First, it is intended to help learners of Irish in ‘ordinary’ (English-medium) second level schools become competent Irish users and speakers. Second, it is designed to help native or native-like speakers to become more sophisticated users of the language. One important stated aim is that, on completion of the course, students’ ability to understand and to speak Irish would be at a sufficiently high level that they could confidently participate in Irish language social interaction:

“Ar chriochnú an chúrsa dóibh, go mbeidh leibhéal fhíor-shásúla gabhchumais agus ginchumais sroichte ag na daltaí, sa chaoi gur féidir leo féidir leis go lánn-mhùinineach i gcáidreamh sóisialta Gaeilge”

(Department of Education, 1995a: 38).

The listening and speaking skills objectives specify that students at this level should be able to understand all kinds of authentic Irish discourse and be able to participate appropriately and with confidence in formal and informal conversations. Students are expected to be able to understand and appreciate all kinds of Irish texts including journalistic, literary and review texts. It is also intended that students should be able to express themselves accurately through the medium of writing and be capable of producing long compositions on a range of topics. As at other levels, an integrated approach to teaching the language is advocated. The communicative functions are to be realised through receptive and productive activities based on recommended topics. A much wider variety of topics is found in the Higher Level Irish syllabus than in the Ordinary Level Irish syllabus. There is also a greater emphasis on Irish culture and Irish literature at Higher Level.

In addition to the five prescribed works of prose used at Ordinary Level, students at Higher Level must study one of the following: (a) a collection of short stories, (b) a novel, (c) an autobiography or (d) a drama. They must also study an additional eight poems along with the five recommended for Ordinary Level. There is a strong emphasis on grammar and pronunciation at this level: students are expected to be able to speak Irish accurately and precisely - ‘le cruinneas agus le beachtas’. In keeping with the communicative nature of the course, it is recommended that grammar be taught within a communicative context.

Higher Level Irish students must also study the history of the Irish language and its literature. They are expected to learn about the origin of Irish and its dialects, the Irish language movements, Irish folklore and significant works of literature, authors and poets. Finally, the principle of Language Awareness is to be emphasised during the course. It is recommended that references be made to the evolution of the language
and comparisons be drawn between the structure of the Irish language and other languages with which students are familiar.

1.7.3 The Leaving Certificate Examination in Irish

A total of 600 marks are awarded in the Leaving Certificate Examination in Irish at both Ordinary and Higher Level. Almost half of these marks go towards the oral and aural examinations. The remainder are split between two written papers, one focusing on knowledge of the language and the other on knowledge of the prescribed texts. In Paper I at Ordinary Level (220 marks), the candidate must write two short compositions (e.g. letter, conversation, story) on given topics as well as answer questions based on texts (reading comprehension). In Paper II at Ordinary Level, the candidate must answer a question on works of prose and poetry from the course (110 marks). For Paper I at Higher Level (170 marks), the student must write a composition (essay, story, newspaper article) which carries 100 marks. The marking scheme (Department of Education and Science, 2000) indicates that 80% of marks are awarded on the basis of the linguistic accuracy of the piece. Paper I also contains a reading comprehension task (70 marks). In the literature paper (Paper II) at Higher Level (180 marks) the candidate must answer two questions on prose, one on poetry and one relating to the history of the language.

About one quarter of the total examination marks is awarded for the oral Irish test at Ordinary and Higher Levels. The majority of these marks (120 marks) are allocated on the basis of the one-to-one oral interview. The remaining 30 marks are divided between a short reading-aloud task and a recitation task. The Leaving Certificate Examination Evaluation Guidelines (Department of Education, 1995a: 56) state that the interview aims to assess candidates’ ability to converse on day to day matters of interest to them and within their level of competence (“gnáthchúrsaí agus gnáthimeachtaí laistigh de raon spéise agus cumais na ndaltaí is mó a bheidh i gceist anseo”). It is a test of spoken language skills and not of knowledge: the questions are seen merely as a means of getting students to converse. Examiners are urged to put candidates at their ease so as to ensure the they will speak as fluently as possible. Output is assessed in terms of (i) lexical content (stór Gaeilge) measured in terms of vocabulary and turn of phrase and (ii) their ability to speak Irish accurately (cumas teanga), assessed in terms of syntax, rhythm, pronunciation and overall fluency.

In the aural Irish examination, the candidate is required to listen to a tape in Irish and write their responses in Irish. A slightly higher proportion of the overall mark is assigned to the aural test at Ordinary Level (20%) than at Higher Level (15%). The same tape is used for both levels but the instructions and questions in the test booklet are different at each level. The topics and situations presented are those which are covered in the syllabus (e.g. conversations, interviews). Some texts used in recording are taken from authentic sources e.g. radio/TV, newspapers/magazines. The material is recorded in a studio by fluent speakers of Irish. All main dialects are represented but major differences in vocabulary, grammar and colloquialisms are avoided. The rate of speech is slower than would be found in authentic situations.
Leaving Certificate Examination statistics
Baseline data for the present study was collected in 2000, shortly before the Leaving Certificate Examination. In that year, a total of 54,553 students took Irish in the established Leaving Certificate Examination (see Appendix B). The numbers and proportions of students taking Irish at the three levels are as follows: Foundation Level - 10.5% (n=5,733); Ordinary Level - 58.4% (n=31,862) and Higher Level - 31.1% (n=16,958). Leaving Certificate Examination statistics for other years which are presented in Appendix B indicate that the overall proportions of the total cohort taking Irish at each of these three levels in the Leaving Certificate Examination has remained reasonably stable over the past seven years (1996-2002).

A gender imbalance is revealed when comparing the proportions across levels in the Leaving Certificate 2000 statistics. Almost twice as many females (65%) as males (35%) sat the Higher Level paper in Irish while male students were almost twice as likely as female students (62%; 38%) to take the Foundation Level paper. At Ordinary Level, there was a one to one ratio of male to female students. The preponderance of females taking the Higher Level paper is also found in the case of foreign languages at Leaving Certificate level. Of students taking Higher Level French, 64% were female and 36% were male. For Ordinary Level French, the proportions were 43% female and 57% male. In the case of German, the proportions for Higher Level were 63% female and 37% male. But at Ordinary Level German there were equal numbers of male and female students.

Data presented in Appendix B also show that the numbers of candidates who got honours (Grade C or higher) in the Leaving Certificate Irish Higher Level paper did not change much in the period 1996-2002. However, the data in relation to ‘fail’ grades at Ordinary Level indicate a substantial drop in the numbers failing in the year 2000. In 1996, 11% failed Ordinary Level Irish. This peaked in 1997 with a 14% failure rate. However, in 2000 the percentages fell sharply to 6% and have maintained themselves at 5% since then. Furthermore, the proportion of ‘low’ pass grades (D3) also peaked in 1997 (16.4%), suggesting that in borderline cases students may have been given the benefit of the doubt. One explanation for lower performance in 1997 may be related to the fact that this cohort was the first to have studied the revised Leaving Certificate Course in Irish and to have taken examinations based on that course. It is plausible that in the first few years following the introduction of a new curriculum there may be a period of adjustment for both those who set and mark the examinations as well as for the candidates themselves.

The improvement in grades in recent years may also indicate that the new communicative course is beginning to pay dividends in terms of oral/aural skills. It will be recalled that under the present system a half of the overall marks for Irish are awarded on the basis of the oral and aural examinations in Irish. It could also be argued that student motivation has improved. However, preliminary findings from a survey of secondary school teachers by the Irish language organisation, Gaeil Linn, and reported in Foinse, an Irish language newspaper (Mac Gearailt, 2001) suggest that teachers are having difficulty motivating students. Finally, there is the question of the consistency of marking policy from year to year. In another newspaper article regarding Junior Certificate Examination Results in Irish (Mac Con Iomaire, 1999) it
has been suggested that scores and grades are often adjusted during the marking process. It can only be concluded that because of the many factors which can vary in the Leaving Certificate assessment procedure, the results cannot in their present form be reliably used as a barometer of change in standards across time. Clearly, there is a need for surveys of achievement at second level using more objective methods of assessment such as those conducted at primary level (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a).

1.7.4 Leaving Certificate candidates’ overall time spent learning Irish

Earlier, it was shown (see section 1.5.2) that individuals who had participated in more advanced instructional programmes in Irish were associated with higher levels of achievement in Irish. While this is to be expected, it is likely that at least part of the advantage can be explained in terms of the learner’s extra exposure to the language as well as by the type of instruction. In general, the greater the number of hours exposure to the target language, the higher the proficiency in that language (Swain, 1978). A survey of Irish at sixth-grade in primary school in 1985 showed that time devoted to teaching Irish as a subject was a significant predictor of achievement in Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1988b).

Some language policies have specified expected levels of competence in terms of number of instructional hours. For example, in 1977, the Ontario Ministry of Education in Canada set down three basic levels of competence which may be achieved from second language programmes (Swain, 1981: 490). The ‘basic’ level of competence is considered to be achievable in 1,200 hours, a ‘middle’ level in 2,100 hours and a ‘top’ level in 5,000 hours. A ‘basic’ level indicates that a learner has acquired “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 French in later life”. A learner who has reached the ‘middle’ level should be able “to read newspapers and books of personal interest with help from a dictionary, to understand radio and television, to participate adequately in conversation and to function reasonably well in a French-speaking community after a few months’ residence”. The ‘top’ level, should enable the learner to “continue his or her education using French as the language of instruction at the college or university level, to accept employment using French as the working language, and to participate easily in conversation”.

In the early eighties, Harris (1984) estimated “the total number of hours exposure to Irish during the primary-school years” to be roughly about 1,728. This was based on a weekly average of approximately 5.4 hours per school week. The recommended minimum number of hours for Irish in the new primary school Irish curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999b: 17) is considerably lower (3.5 hours per week) than this average. Summing across the whole eight years of primary school, this more recent estimate amounts to 936 hours. A similar calculation for post-primary schools, based on figures supplied by the Department of Education and Science (2002), indicates that the total time spent learning Irish at secondary is almost half of that at primary. This is estimated on the basis of an average of three hours Irish per week (x 66 weeks) at the two years of senior level and two hours and forty minutes a
Background to the study

week (x 99 weeks) at junior level (3 years), giving a total average of 452 hours. Combining the estimates for primary and secondary school gives an average of 1,388 hours. If time on Irish during the one year optional transition year cycle is included the total may be somewhat higher but is, at best, unlikely to be more than 1,450 hours, still well below that estimated by Harris (1984) for primary school alone. These comparisons suggest that there has been a significant decline in the time spent learning Irish since the 1980’s.

If one were to describe the majority of current Leaving Certificate graduates of Irish in terms of the three levels of proficiency defined above for French learners in Ontario, they would, given the number of hours currently spent learning Irish, be functioning at a ‘basic’ level of proficiency. It will be recalled, however, that the Leaving Certificate Higher Level course in Irish expects that students would, on completion of that course, be able to function competently through the medium of Irish in general social interaction.

Finally, it is interesting to compare the number of Irish contact hours in the ‘ordinary’ school system with the corresponding amount in the ‘all-Irish’ or immersion school system. The ‘all-Irish’ estimate was calculated on the basis of the length of the school day (minus time on English instruction) over the eight year primary cycle and the five year secondary cycle. The final estimate for ‘full’ immersion (from primary through secondary) students who have completed the Leaving Certificate programme is approximately 10,700 hours, a figure which is almost eight times that for ‘ordinary’ school students who are taught the language as a subject only. These immersion school leavers would under the proficiency definitions presented earlier be considered more than capable of functioning at the ‘top’ level of proficiency. That is to say, if they so wished, they should be able to partake in all conversations in Irish, proceed to third level Irish-medium education, or take up employment where Irish is the working language.