

The Use of Irish in Loughrea

A Sociolinguistic Survey on the Use of Irish in Loughrea
and opinions as to the Possibilities of Extending the Use

A Report prepared in 2009
for *Gaeilge Locha Riach* in conjunction with *Galway County Council*
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Introduction

In 2008, as part of an Irish Language Planning strategy for East Galway, *Gaeilge Locha Riach* and *Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe* commenced a project to ascertain the levels of ability in Irish in Loughrea, the extent of the usage of Irish and people's attitudes towards both the language and possible efforts to promote it in the future. It was deemed important to establish the level of support that exists for, not alone, the development of an extensive Irish language plan for Loughrea but also for an Irish Language Centre and for the employment of trained Irish language facilitators.

In conjunction with a staff member and a postgraduate student on the MA in Language Planning Course in Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, An Cheathrú Rua, the project's organisers formulated a detailed questionnaire to be put to the public and facilitated interviews and general meetings of interested parties, all of which happened during the early summer months of 2009. In order to achieve a 5% margin of error with a confidence interval of 95% over 350 people were randomly selected from the Electoral Register in the Loughrea Urban and Rural DEDs to answer the questionnaire. Throughout May a second post-graduate student from the MA in Language Planning course interviewed people and achieved a response rate of around 70% of those who could be found. Long-term residents of Loughrea were particularly supportive, with those living in the area eight years or more comprising 80% of the respondents. People were very cooperative and courteous and our gratitude is once again extended to all who participated in the written survey or who attended the public meetings.

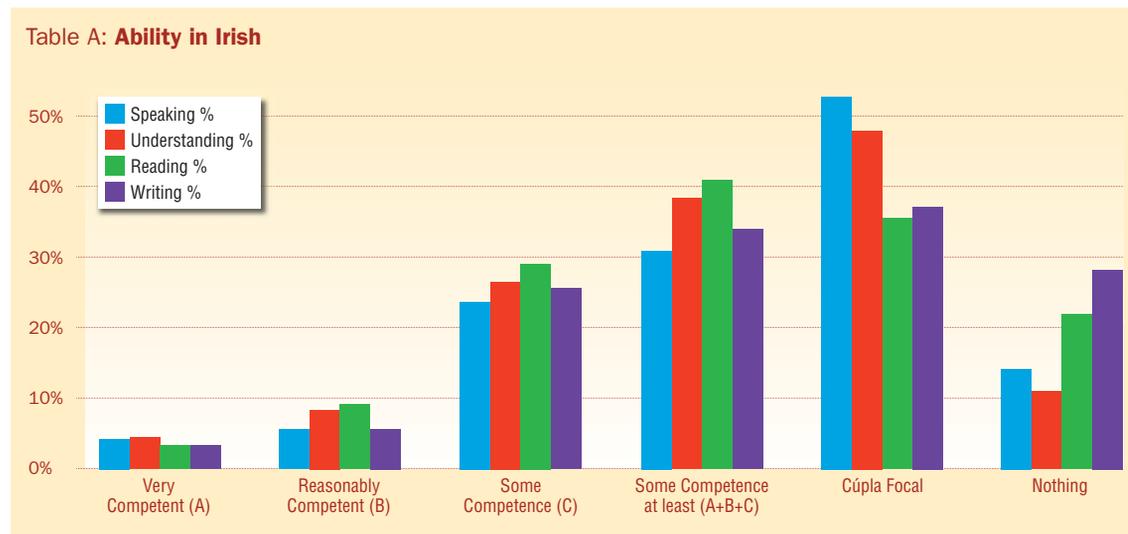
The significant data from the survey is presented here. Other tables, graphs and people's written comments are to be found on the CD accompanying the booklet, as well as copies of the questionnaire in English and in Irish. A number of local Irish language leaders were also interviewed at length and their opinions are included in the findings. During June two public meetings were held, one through the medium of Irish and one through English. Notes from the meetings are included on the CD. Existing Irish and international literature on the subject was also examined and informs the findings.

A fuller version of the Report is also to be found in Irish on the CD.

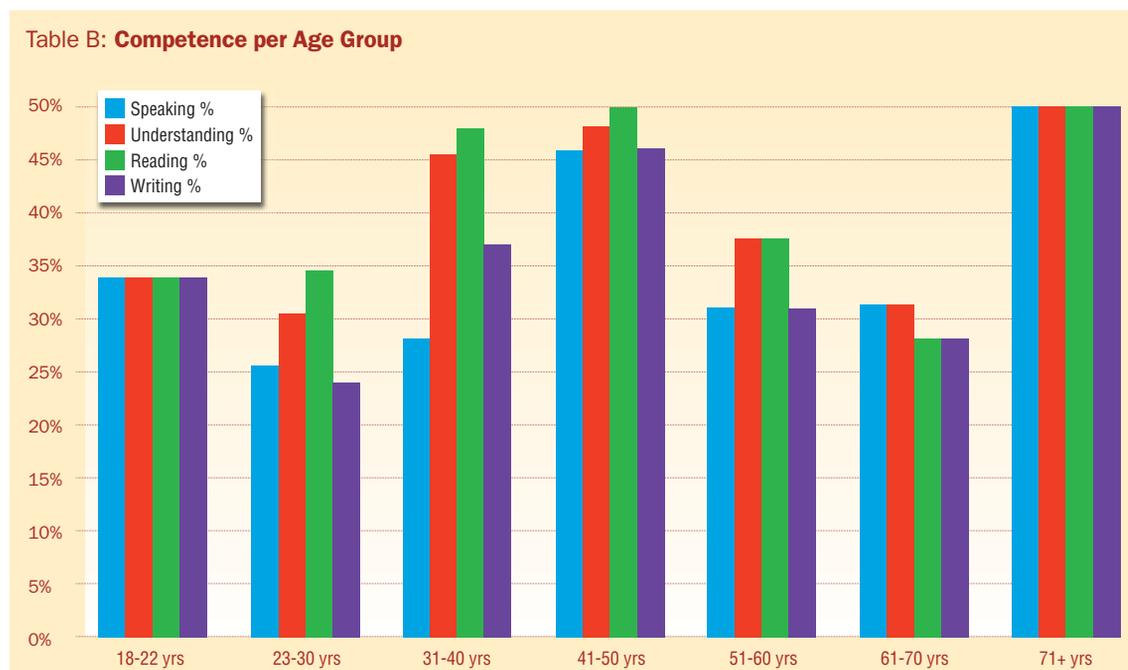
The Findings

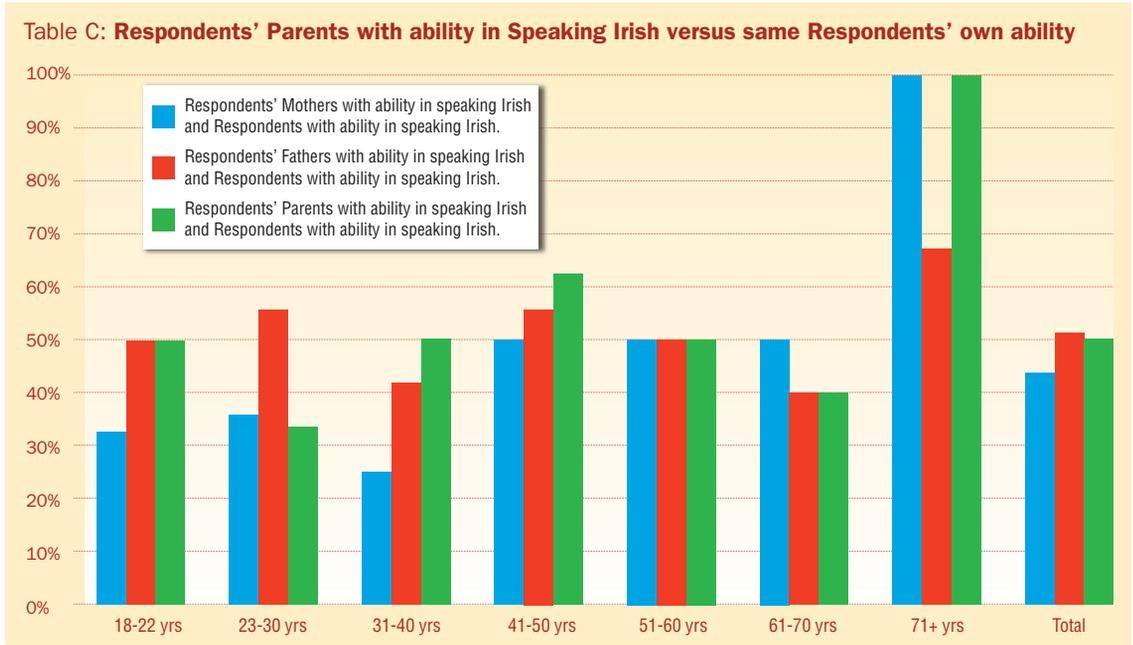
Ability to Speak Irish: Comparison with 2006 Census

32.1% of the surveyed population felt that they had at least ‘some competence’ in speaking Irish with 8.4%, a quarter of the 32.1%, or 1-in-12 people overall, reported being ‘very or reasonably competent’ in speaking Irish. While 38.2% was reported in Loughrea as being able to speak Irish in the 2006 Census, when these figures are adjusted for school children, no significant difference is to be seen in comparison with the Census figures. As reported in the Census, Loughrea Rural has a higher proportion of Irish speakers than Loughrea Urban.



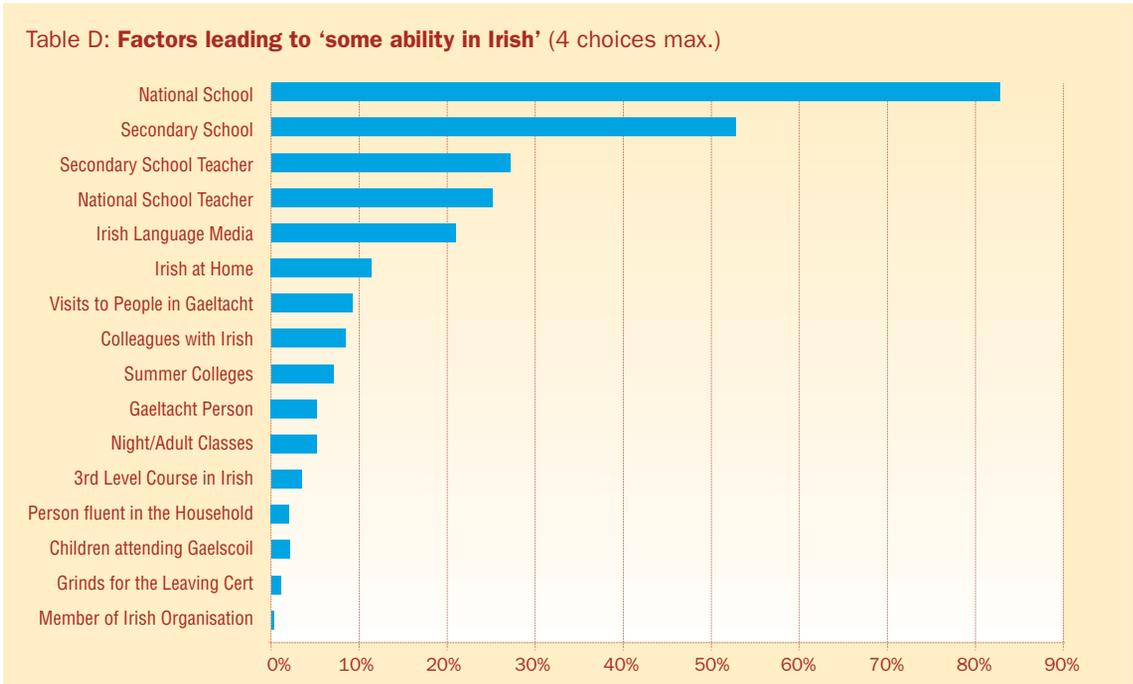
As Table A shows, ability to understand and read Irish, as opposed to speaking and writing is higher in Loughrea with 39.8% showing ‘some competence’ at least in understanding Irish and 41.5% ‘some competence’ in reading Irish.





Age Groups, Families and Factors Contributing to Competence in Irish

Table B shows the 41 to 50 year-olds being between 8-12% above average in having 'some competence' in speaking, understanding and reading Irish. This is the age group that would have been the first generation to have, not alone a majority complete their Leaving Certificate, but indeed have over 75% do so, and also, that would have completed their second level education by 1987. The lower percentages in the under-40's (25.6% and 28.3% for Speaking Irish with 'Some Competence' in the age-groups 23-30 and 31-40 years respectively) seem to suggest that the 'School effect' on one's Irish is not lasting as long as it used to. Another trend that seems to show a decline in inter-generational ability is that, whereas 8.4%



of respondents reported being 'very or reasonably fluent', as much as 15.9% said their mothers have (or had) such competence and 15.3% their fathers.

Further examination of those respondents with 'some competence', as in Table C, shows a weakening in the transmission of Irish from parents with 'some competence' to the now-adult children under 40 years as compared to those from 41 to 60 years whose parents had 'some competence'. Again the age group from 41-50 years scores quite high. It seems from the mid-80's some competence in Irish amongst parents has not been passed on as much as it was before.

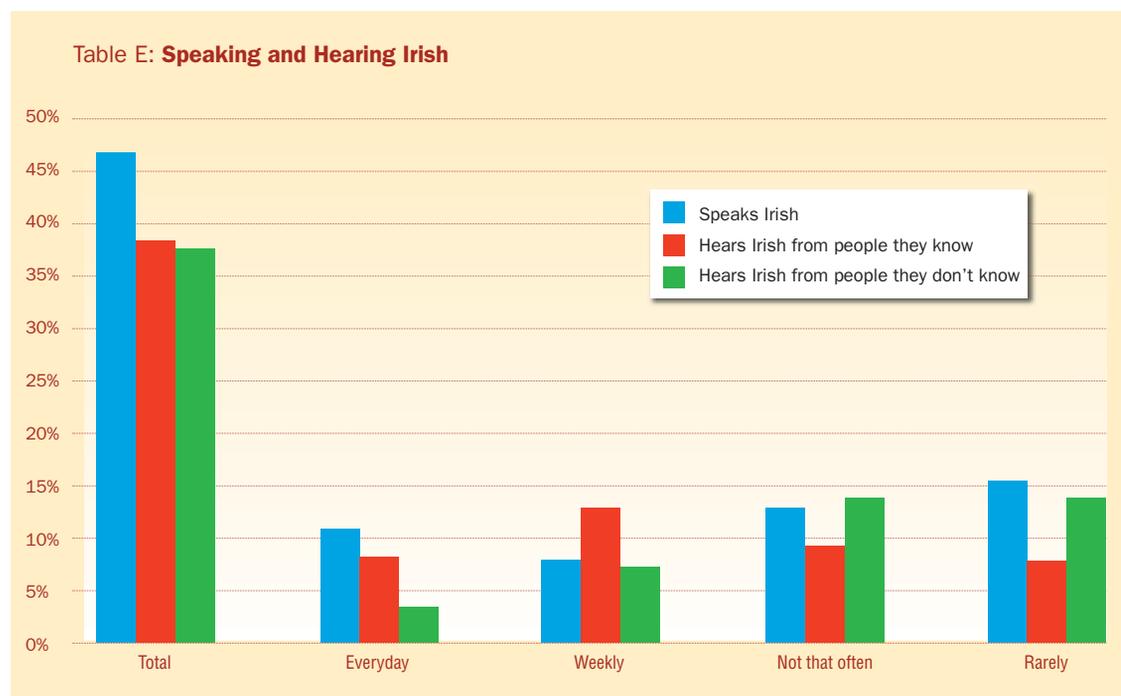
The Home

Table D shows what respondents consider to be the important factors in their having acquired 'some competence' – 'home' being important coming in third place after 'school' and 'media'.

In Wales, in order to promote the Welsh language, a scheme called *Tiwf* exists, which assists young couples in using the language at home. It involves giving widespread information, professional, comprehensive and continuous advice and having a network of family support activities. A similar scheme could be adopted here as regards Irish. The challenge then for all families is to aid and help teachers' work with Irish in school. Speaking and reading Irish at home, by those who have at least 'some competence' in the language, would allow the front-line Irish language teachers to no longer feel that they alone are burdened with the preservation of the language.

Actual Speaking/ Hearing of Irish

Table E shows that an impressive 10.8% report speaking Irish everyday, rising to 31% speaking at least 'now and again'. Similar figures are reported with 'hearing Irish', 29% 'now and again from people they know' and less, 24% from 'strangers now and again'. In interviews with Irish language leaders, it was felt that there was a difference between solely using well-known phrases in Irish and actually interacting in the language and carrying out even a small conversation and that the questionnaire did not delve this far into the kind of Irish that people use. Others reported using Irish exclusively with small children at



homework time. Bearing these points in mind then, there is some use of Irish in Loughrea but not to any extensive degree.

As regards the most fluent speakers, of whom there are 8.4%, only 3% of the survey report hearing Irish from people they don't know on a daily basis. Mac Gréil and Rhatigan's (2009: 83) comment: 'Most Irish-speaking respondents accept the convention of being reluctant to initiate conversations in Irish or ... to use it in company whose competence to speak the language is unknown to them' seems to hold true here as well.

Schools and Education

The survey results emphasize how important the education system has been in teaching Irish. Primary school, second level school and 'the effect of particular teachers' are all mentioned (see Tables D and F) as being the most significant reasons for people having Irish. Generally speaking, having achieved Leaving Certificate level in education is the main factor that correlates with having 'some competence' in Irish. Nonetheless school's effect on people's levels of Irish seems to be on the wane. Harris (2006, 8), in an in-depth study, notes a slide in the ability levels in Irish at primary level and proposes a list of remedies, some within an individual school's grasp but many that can only be resolved at national level. Harris (2008: 188) also points to the lack of support groups for Irish in ordinary schools.

In a previous era of language planning almost all Irish language promotion was left to schools. A new phase of planning will have to have community support channeled to help all schools, both from the Irish language organisations and from the wider community.

At second level, while most of the above points would also apply, people also felt that going to the Gaeltacht (see Table M) in the summer to be very important and that the scholarship system be extended and developed. It has also to be noted that Irish a core subject in the Leaving Certificate is under threat (Ó Riagáin, 2008: 63).

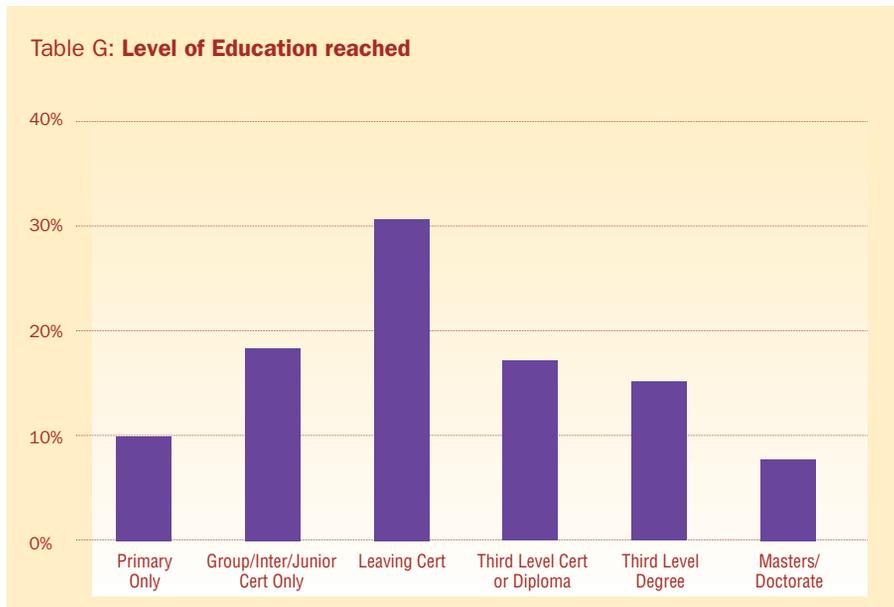
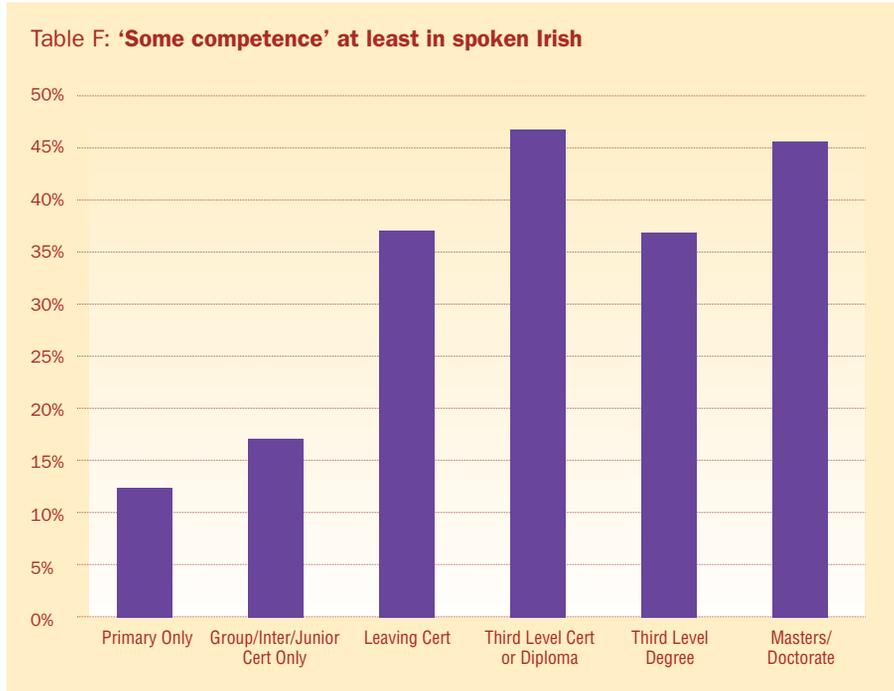
Loughrea's Gaelscoil has by now well established itself and has integrated into the local community, providing a lot of the back up for *Gaeilge Lochá Riach's* activities. The very-mixed socio-economic background of the Gaelscoil's community is seen as a positive factor. As regards a second level dimension people do not support it to that high a degree, perhaps because a suitable school started in nearby Athenry in 2006, which serves the area.

On the subject of fluency and immersion schools, Vila i Moreno, a Catalan, is noted (2007: 48), saying that there was a need 'to reconsider the competence issue even in immersion schools.' Jones (1998: 348) also mentions that 'immersion education does not hold all the answers. Without reinforcement at the level of community the (spoken) variety will remain non-native-like.' For the Gaelscoil, the question of the integration of the learners and the wider fluent Irish language community is a matter to be addressed on an ongoing basis.

Overall Acquisition and Use of Irish

No more than a gaelscoil, or indeed any school, can hold all the answers, wider immersion activities need to be organized, especially for youth. Both the Welsh Language Board in 2006 (mentioned in Ó Riagáin et al, 2007: 49) and Ó Curnáin (2009) see the need for 'Irish-only' language sanctuaries (*tearmainn teanga*), outside of school, where young people could have safe, structured places and activities to practice and use their Irish, without being constantly pressurized to speak English. Table M shows wide support for language activities for young people. Trained staff will be needed to allow such 'sanctuaries' to develop and establish themselves as long-term institutions. Loughrea has a head start in this regard through its existing youth activities for the Gaelscoil's past pupils and the sizeable amount of teenagers that attend

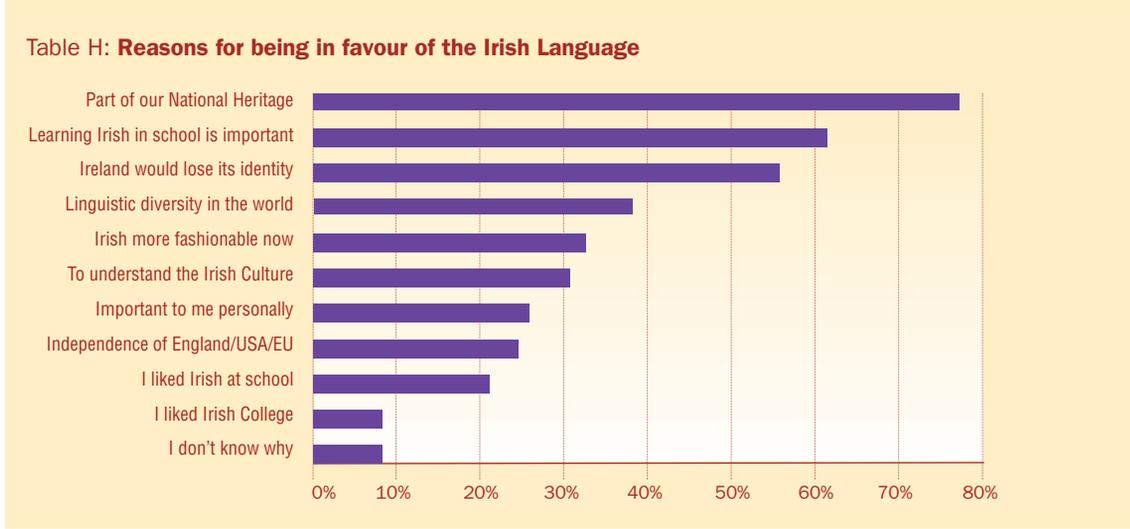
immersion summer courses in the Gaeltacht. The survey also lists the wide variety of past-times popular in the area amongst young and old in Tables L and N. These should also guide any future planning.



Attitudes to Irish

While support for Irish is extensive, with over 80% stated to be in favour of the language, some shift in opinion is to be noted as to why people are in support compared to previous national surveys*. Table H shows that support remains high for the statements affirming Irish as part of our heritage/identity. On

* National or Gaeltacht Surveys of 1973, 1983, 1989, 1993, 2000, 2005, 2007-8 are listed in the Bibliography.



the other hand ‘To really understand Irish culture one must know Irish’ is a statement that involves more commitment to everyone actually learning the language. It elicited 45-50% support in previous surveys whereas here this has declined to 30.8%. Support for ‘learning Irish at school being important’ remains significant at 62%.

Ecological support for Irish seems to be reflected in the strong first-time showing of “linguistic diversity” in a survey. The ‘fashionability’ of Irish is to be seen with 32.5% mentioning it but a word of warning might be added here, as fashions tend to be short-lived. In 1993 a national survey had 37% mentioning supporting Irish as ‘it made us more independent’ and here it has declined to 24.1%.

A number of other points on attitude to the language are to be noted. In Mac Gréil & Rhatigan’s survey (2009: 107) they mention the continuing respect people have for Irish speakers but the point was also made in a survey interview that children, even senior gaelscoil children, pick up an attitude from adults, that ‘maybe one shouldn’t be speaking too much Irish’.

Overall it points to a need for further analysis and research of our attitudes to Irish so as to greater inform the language planning process.

Media & Business

The survey results point to a major role for the media in promoting the Irish language. TG4 is very popular with not alone sports programmes

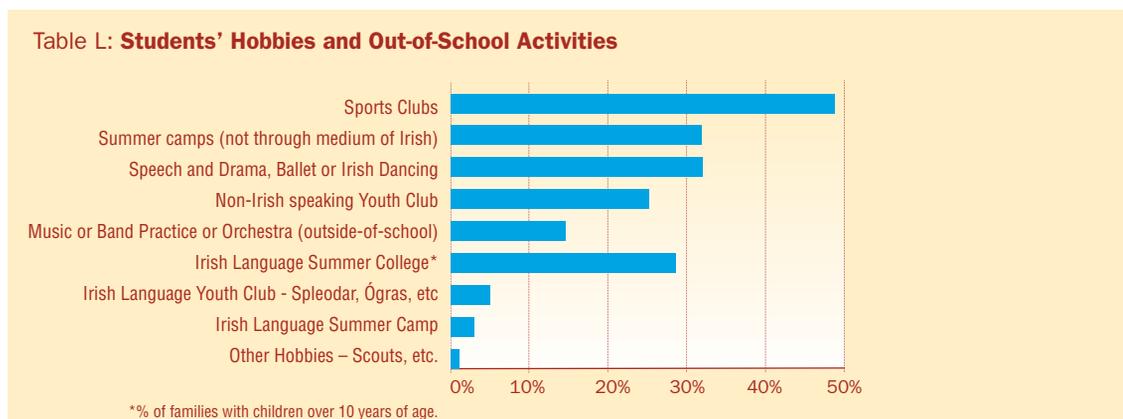
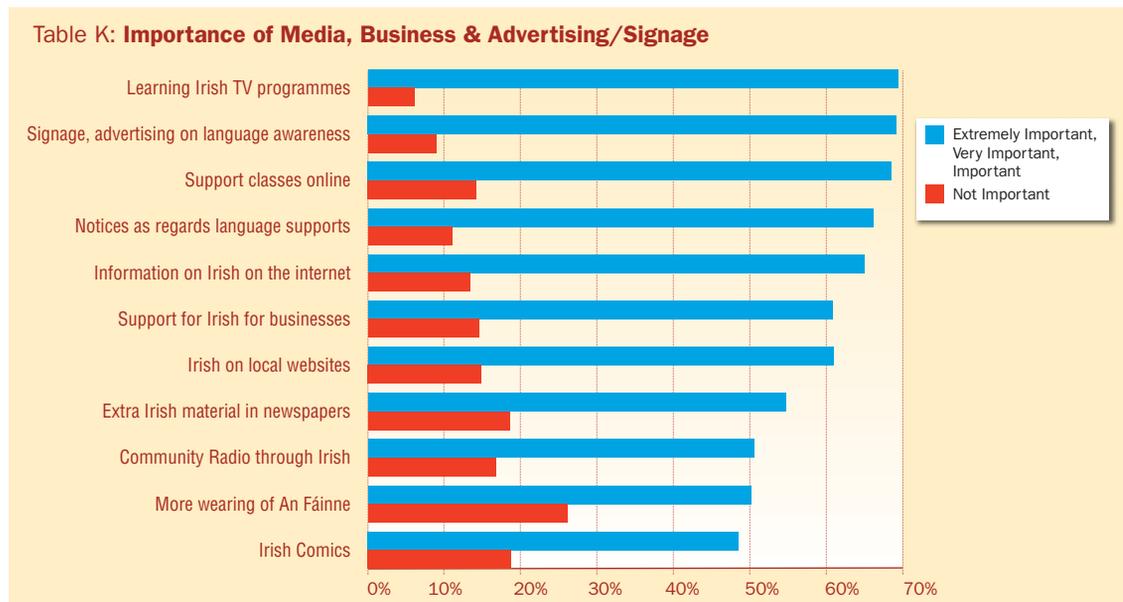
Table J: What programmes do you view in Irish on TV?

Sport	Documentaries	Ros na Rún	Nuacht	Children’s TV	Other
35.3%	29.3%	28.7%	19.2%	15.6%	5.4%

attracting viewers but ‘soaps’, children’s TV and especially documentaries being supported (Table J). A lack of programming specifically directed at helping the learner is to be seen (Table K) and perhaps language planners should draw the attention of institutions like TG4 to this issue.

The amount of people reading Irish at 12.9% is far below the 40% or so with ‘some competence’ in reading and points to room for development, possibly with the reading-based internet. Irish language radio also doesn’t fair well with just below 24% ever listening in. The various internet initiatives on the language all have over 60% support in the survey (Table K).

Business support for Irish is also deemed important (Table K) with 61-69% noting as important that initiatives in this sphere be taken.



Planning

Ó Coimín, writing for the last major national policy document on Irish, on behalf of the *Advisory Planning Committee* in 1988, commented (APC: xiv) that ‘ad-hoc-ery’ was widespread as regards the Irish language. This has continued as most of the language efforts commenced in Loughrea in recent years have been the result of the work of random groups and individuals, not any national policy.

With the publication of the Government statement on Irish in late 2006 and the imminent publication of the 20-year Plan for Irish, *Plean 2028*, national support for language planning may finally be put on a sound footing. This combined with the strong local support for Irish and many other positive points outlined here leave Loughrea in as good a position as any to build upon the work of the last few years.

Gaeilge Locha Riach’s sole full-time employee, who is now a victim of his own success, in so much as a great demand exists for his services, cannot possibly cover all the planning, staffing and permanent professional support that will be required.

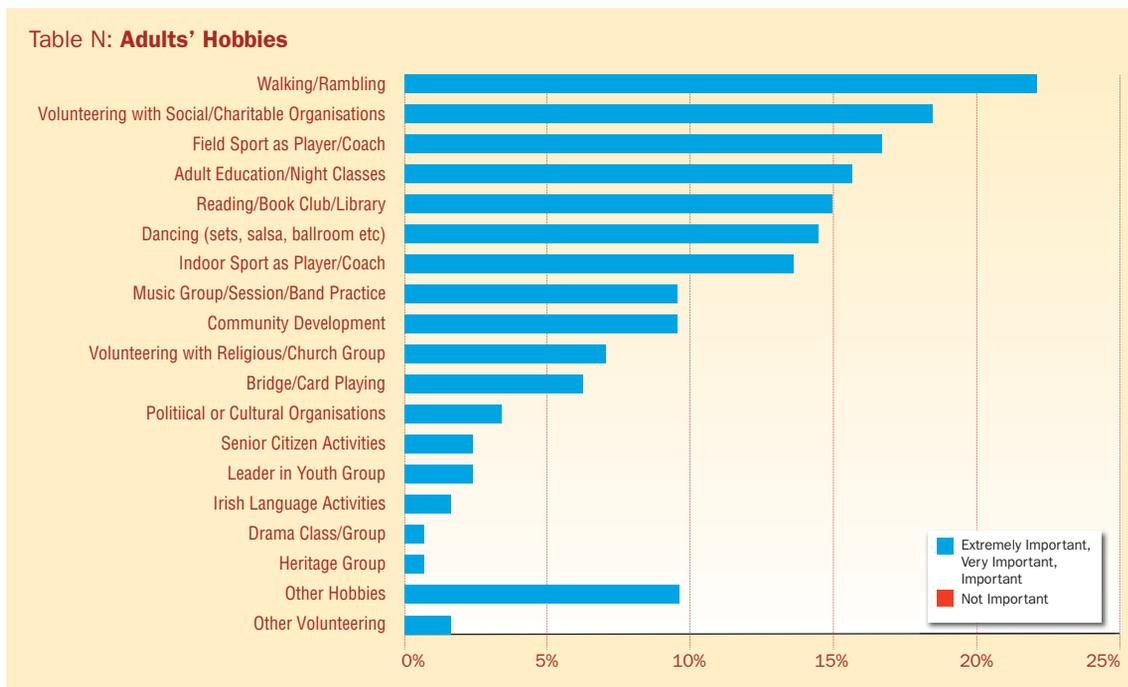
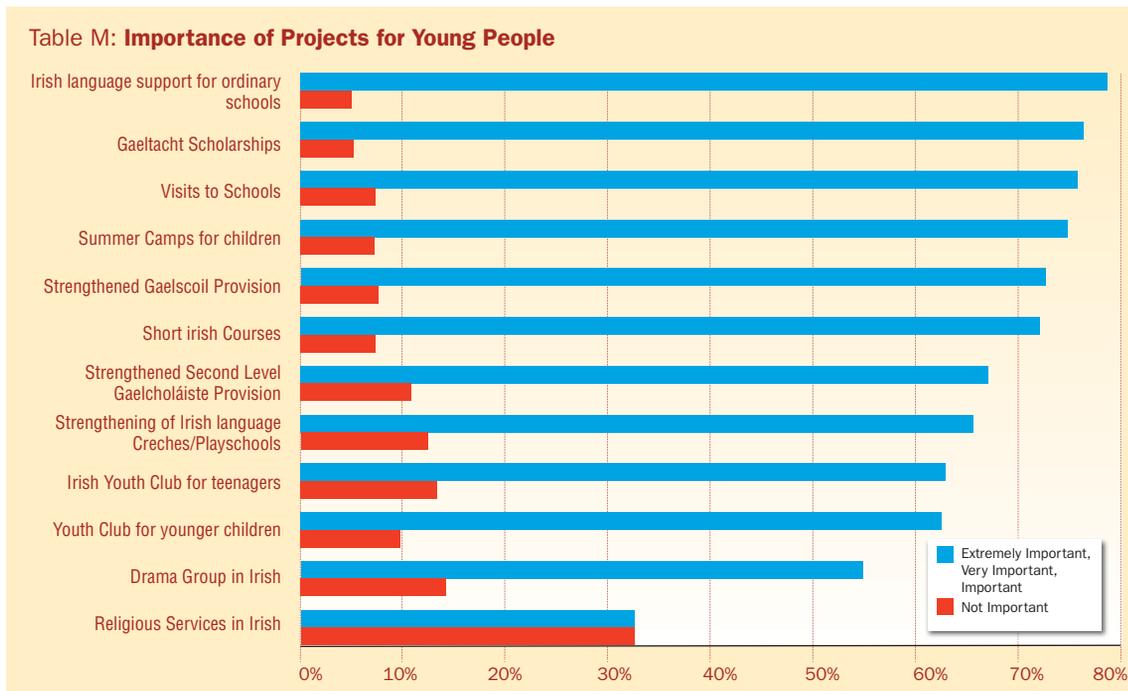
A realistic target for Loughrea would be to achieve widespread effective learning, and re-learning, of Irish with its actual informal use greatly extended. What this involves is a planning process backed-up by resources. Mac Giolla Chríost (2008: 93) noted ‘(that) the need for strategic investment in micro-level language planning is pressing’. He also refers to a Welsh micro-level language planning scheme known as *Mentrau Iaith*** that could be duplicated here. What would be envisaged is each community

**Mentrau Iaith* are Welsh language micro-planning groups located in towns and villages.

doing it's own plan, all sectors involved, having ownership on a continuous basis and it being a process not a once-off document. Joshua Fishman (1996: 193) felt that that will happen where there are 'consensual advantages' for all, that the whole community benefits, that the town is a better place, in its entirety, because of the effort put in.

As regards 'An Irish language Building', those attending one of the meetings demanded that the possibility and worthiness of renovating an old building as an Irish language centre be looked at. On the other hand, an interviewee pointed to the possible overwhelming of the human resources of a language organisation that could occur in taking responsibility for the running of same.

The language planning process, staffing and appropriate supports, including a building, all go hand-



in-hand and all receive resounding support in the survey results with 77-80% (Table Q) deeming them at least 'important' with 36-40% going as far as saying that these three points are 'extremely or very important'.

Tábla P: 'I am in favour of Activities to promote Irish as a Spoken Language'

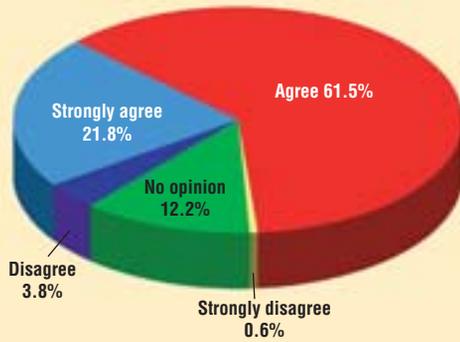


Table Q: Importance of an Irish Language Centre, Local Plan and Need for Trained Staff'

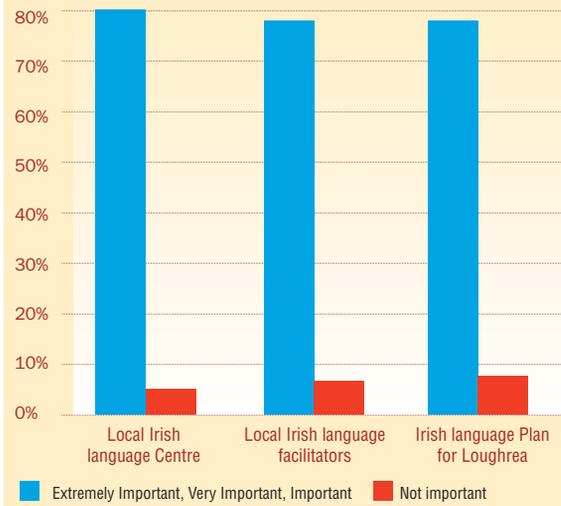
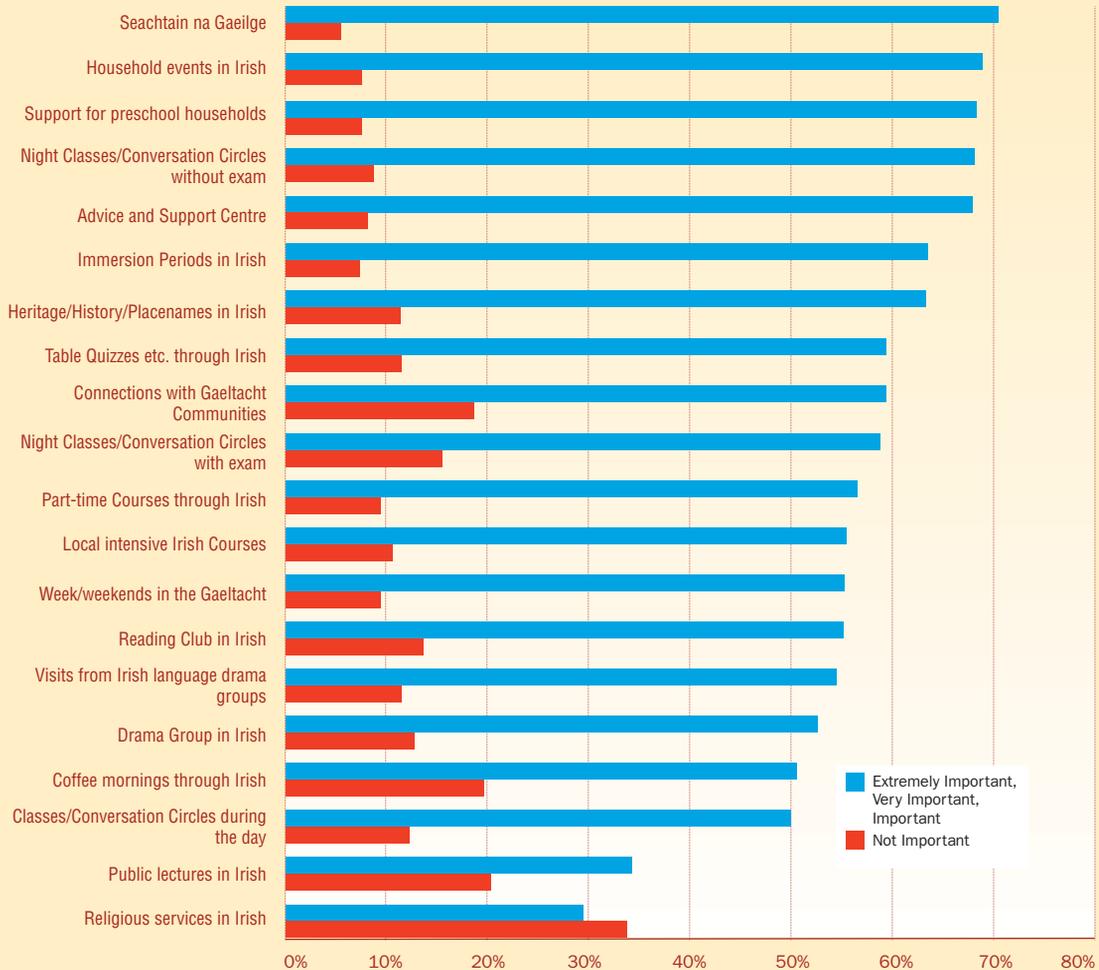


Table R: Importance of Projects for Households and Adults



Recommendations

- That Irish Language Planning at community level be holistic with maximum possible participation and ownership of the process by not alone individuals but organizations, state, private, business or voluntary.
- That the success of activities always be measured primarily by how they advance actual acquisition and use of Irish.
- That the local Irish language leadership change direction slightly by giving a secondary role to campaigns to have an Irish language dimension in all community events. This Irish language dimension is important but the criteria of 'how much Irish is actually being acquired/used' should have primacy and priority when allocating scarce resources.
- That all teachers of Irish in ordinary schools, and the local educational partners, be supported as much as possible and that the Harris proposals (2006) be implemented.
- That local Irish Language organisations and the local community engage politically with the relevant regional and national agencies so as to remove any barriers to the acquisition of Irish in every school and also enhance the status of the language.
- That specific and concrete steps be adopted in the primary teacher-training colleges, along the lines of six- to twelve-month immersion of all trainees in very small groups in various kinds of all-Irish speaking environments, inside and outside the Gaeltacht, so as to ensure that all teachers of the language are quite confident in and comfortable with their own competence in the Irish language.
- That younger speakers be cared for by the creation of 'language sanctuaries' in order that they acquire Irish in a secure linguistic environment and that they remain using the language in the long-term and continue to acquire informal interpersonal skills in the language that will allow them to carry on conversations with any Irish speaker.
- That all young people, who are studying Irish at school, have a chance to participate in immersion programmes in Irish *outside of school-time* through 'language sanctuaries' or otherwise.
- That the local investment of time and resources in research continue. That also, arising from this study, Irish language agencies nation-wide, pay attention to the results and ensure that sociolinguistic research is not neglected, something, for instance, that the Welsh have invested quite an amount in.
- That use of the new technologies in every part of Irish language acquisition and use be continued extensively.
- That the Gaelscoil sector continue to be aware of the need to integrate its learners with the wider authentic Irish-speaking community.
- That Irish language planners and language acquisition workers be trained locally and nationally so that a professional team be in place to carry out the work above.
- That a national training course for professional facilitators of Irish Language after-school activities for youth and leisure-time activities for adults be set up so that towns such as Loughrea have a pool of trained staff to select from.
- That a scheme similar to the Welsh *Twf* be developed in order to spread the use of Irish in the home and provide support for pre-school families.
- That State agencies, health, education and others, and sports' bodies (GAA, etc) use as much Irish as possible, especially in dealing with Gaelscoil children.
- That it is essential that the *Gaeilge Locha Riach* office be maintained and given a five- to ten-year financial commitment and further resources.
- That the Irish Language Planning Process for Loughrea begin in 2010 and since the town and environs is well-positioned to commence such a process, once *Plean 2028* is published, that it be considered as a possible pilot case for the development of progressive Irish language planning.

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