**LEAVING CERTIFICATE LANGUAGES - PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE**

Language policy in Ireland should be more centrally placed in national strategic planning. This note looks at aspects of language achievement at Leaving Certificate level, the highest school level. It looks at the main languages studied by level and gender. It compares achievement by language. It raises a number of questions relevant to language policy.

**MAIN LANGUAGE EXAMINATION ENTRIES 2014**

Table 1 gives the 2014 Leaving Certificate participants by main language, level and gender.

**Table 1: Leaving Certificate Examination 2014: Main Language Entries**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Language** | **Total Entry**  **H and O** | **Higher Entry** | **% at**  **Higher** | **Higher Entries**  M% F% |
| **English** | 52,274 | 35,121 | 67.2% | 45.5% 54.5% |
| **Irish** | 41,465 | 18,134 | 43.7% | 37.1% 62.9% |
| **French** | 26,586 | 15,014 | 56.5% | 38.6% 61.4% |
| **German** | 6,858 | 4,723 | 68.9% | 42.0% 58.0% |
| **Spanish** | 5,340 | 3,397 | 63.6% | 38.1% 61.9% |

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* The 5 languages in Table 1 contribute 36.5% of all Leaving Certificate entries.
* English, the dominant global language, is a “universal” subject with 52,000+ entries. Two in three, 67.1%, are at Higher level. The male proportion at Higher level, 45.5%, is the highest male proportion at that level for any main language.
* Irish, a language studied at primary and second level, had 41,500 entries at Higher and Ordinary levels. It had the lowest proportion by far, 43.7%, at Higher Level. It also had the lowest proportion of males, 37.1%, taking that Higher level.
* French is the dominant European language in Irish second level schools with three times the Higher entries compared to the next language, German.
* German had the highest proportion at Higher level, 68.9%. It had a stronger male uptake at Higher, 42.0%, compared to other languages, except English.
* The next language after Spanish in entry size was the non-curricular Polish with 750 entries, 46.1% male and 53.9% female. Non-curricular tests are adjudged to be at Higher level.

**CHANGES IN HIGHER ENTRIES**

Leaving Certificate enrolment is increasing with population growth and age group participation rates now at 90+%.

From 2011 levels the Higher Entries in English in 2014 had increased by 7.1%. In that period the entries in Higher French increased by a similar proportion, 8.0%.

Since 2011 Higher Irish, influenced seemingly by assessment changes, has increased by 26.3%. German since 2011 has had a 12.8% increase in 2014 at Higher level.

Spanish has shown the biggest change. Since 2011 its Higher entry has increased by 41.1%

**PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH AND IRISH**

Tables 2 and 3 give an outline of the performance and grade pattern of those who took English and Irish and enable a comparison of the performance in these languages by students, male and female, who have studied both for 11/12 years. The comparison raises serious questions.

**Table 2: English Results 2014: Level and Gender**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Higher Grades**  A/B C/D | **Ordinary Grades**  A/B C/D | **Total Passing**  H and O |
| **English 2014** | **Total** | 12,554 22,091  24.0% 42.5% | 6,343 10,221  12.1% 19.6% | 51,209  98.0% |
| **English 2014** | **Female** | 7,434 11,545  28.6% 44.4% | 3,070 3,634  11.8% 14.0% | 25,683  98.9% |
| **English 2014** | **Male** | 5,120 10,546  19.5% 40.1% | 3,273 6,587  12.4% 25.0% | 25,526  97.0% |

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* Over 34,500 received a passing grade at Higher English out of over 51,000 who passed the subject. Clearly the standard of English, its curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment are central to the quality of the Irish educational system.
* There are contrasts in the male/female results in this universal subject. A smaller proportion of males, 19.5%, get high, A/B, grades at Higher level. A much larger proportion, 25%, of males get low, C/D, Ordinary level grades, a level achieved by only 14% of females..

**Table 3: Irish Language Results 2014: Level and Gender**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Higher Grades**  A/B C/D | **Ordinary grades**  A/B C/D | **Total Passing**  H and O |
| **Irish 2014** | **Total** | 9,832 8,196  23.7% 19.8% | 7,675 14,826  18.5% 35.8% | 40,529  97.7% |
| **Irish 2014** | **Female** | 6,559 4,792  30.1% 22.0% | 4,451 5,772  20.4% 26.5% | 21,574  98.9% |
| **Irish 2014** | **Male** | 3,273 3,404  16.7% 17.3% | 3,224 9,054  16.4% 46.1% | 18,955  96.4% |

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* There is a major contrast between the pattern of results in English and in Irish. English has a far greater proportion passing at Higher level. Irish has a much higher proportion, 35.8% compared to 19.6%, getting low, C/D, Ordinary level grades.
* Within the Irish results there is major difference between the male and female grade patterns. There is a high proportion of females, 30.1%, getting high, A/B, grades at Higher, a much higher proportion, remarkably, than those 22% of females getting Higher C/D grades. The number of males getting A/B grades at Higher level is half the number of females.
* Over 46% of all male candidates, almost one in every two, achieve low, C/D, grades at Ordinary level after 11 years of study of Irish. The female figure is 26.5%.
* The National University of Ireland requires an Ordinary grade D in Irish for Irish applicants to matriculate. This standard in 2014 was achieved by 40,500 students. It is difficult to apply the word “selection” to such a requirement.
* There is no distinction in the curriculum or assessment in school Irish between native Irish speakers and those for whom it is a second language. This requires explanation.
* The compulsion in relation to Irish must have objectives. Are these objectives met by the pattern of results in Table 3?

**PERFORMANCE IN MAJOR EUROPEAN LANGUAGES**

Table 4 gives the grade achievement pattern in 2014 in major European languages.

**Table 4: Language Results 2014: Main European Languages**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Higher Grades**  A/B C/D | **Ordinary Grades**  A/B C/D | **Total Passing**  H and O |
| **French Total** | 5,965 8,708  22.5% 32.9% | 2,058 8,492  7.8% 32.1% | 25,223  95.2% |
| **German Total** | 2,100 2,516  30.6% 36.7% | 770 1,210  11.2% 17.6% | 6,596  96.2% |
| **Spanish Total** | 1,667 1,654  31.2% 31.0% | 706 1,121  13.2% 21.0% | 5,148  96.4% |

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* Table 4 shows different patterns of results between languages.
* There is a significant gap between the proportion of French students getting high, A/B, grades at Higher level and the proportions in German and Spanish. That proportion, 22.5%, is higher however than the corresponding proportion for Irish, 17.9%. (Table 3.)
* French has a significantly higher proportion of students, 32.1%, getting low, C/D, Ordinary level grades. The rate for German was 17.6%, for Spanish 21%
* In 2014 in the UK 10,433 students sat A-level French and 4,187 A-level German. Comparing those figures to the achievements at Higher level in Table 4 suggests that Ireland may gain comparative advantage if Higher Leaving Certificate achievement in languages can be transformed into functional language competencies.
* More information can be gained by examining language achievement by gender.

**Table 5: Language Results by Gender: 2014: Main European Languages**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Higher Grades**  A/B C/D | **Ordinary Grades**  A/B C/D | **Total Passing**  H and O |
| **French Female** | 3,870 5,169  25.6% 34.3% | 1,212 4,273  8.0% 28.3% | 14,524  96.3% |
| **French Male** | 2,095 3,539  18.4% 31.0% | 846 4,219  7.4% 37.0% | 10,699  93.8% |
| **German Female** | 1,282 1,406  34.4% 37.7% | 378 619  10.1% 16.6% | 3,685  98.8% |
| **German Male** | 818 1,110  26.2% 35.5% | 392 650  12.5% 20.8% | 2,970  94.9% |
| **Spanish Female** | 1,093 973  35.0% 31.1% | 402 572  12.9% 18.3% | 3,040  97.3% |
| **Spanish Male** | 574 681  25.9% 30.7% | 304 549  13.7% 24.8% | 2,108  95.1% |

* Fewer males study languages and those who do, on average, do not perform as well as their female counterparts.
* The proportion of males getting Higher A/B grades is significantly smaller than the female proportion getting such grades in each language in Tables2, 3 and 5.
* The proportion of males getting low C/D grades at Ordinary level is significantly higher than the corresponding female proportion in each case. In French more than one in every three males, 37%, got a low, C/D, grade at Ordinary level.

**OTHER LANGUAGES**

There are seven other languages examined at the Leaving Certificate. They attracted 981 entries in total at Higher level in 2014. Important languages included are Russian with 292 Higher entries, Japanese with 224 and Arabic with 108.

The important languages of Ireland’s EU immigrants attracted 1460 non-curricular entries in 2014, 54.4% female and 45.6% male. The largest languages were Polish (750), Lithuanian (269) and Romanian (134). The global language Portuguese had 67 non curricular entries.

Mandarin Chinese is not offered as a Leaving Certificate subject.

**SOME QUESTIONS**

This note shows some aspects of the pattern of participation and performance in languages at Leaving Certificate level. Higher Leaving Certificate is the highest level of school achievement. What should the pattern of school outcomes ideally be?

A National Language Policy must address a range of issues. It must consider national standards of English the dominant global language. It has to address policy, objectives and outcomes in relation to the Irish language. It should identify the languages and language skills of strategic importance to Ireland’s future and that of its citizens and promote their acquisition. It must address the languages of Ireland’s immigrant community and ensure continuing language enrichment. Does the pattern of Leaving Certificate outcomes suggest that these issues are being adequately addressed in the school system?

English, the dominant global language, is a universal subject of the Leaving Certificate with, by far, the highest number of Higher level students. How should Ireland ensure the highest standards of English globally? How should national Language Policy ensure the avoidance of the complacency in relation to second language learning common with Anglophone countries and people?

Irish language policy has serious issues to address. Why is there such a disconnection between the investment in school Irish and its use in society? Would the Irish language be better served by a more advanced school programme done, perhaps, by fewer students? Should there be a distinction made in curriculum and assessment, as in other countries, between native speakers and second language learners?

How should Language Policy address the comparative under participation and under achievement by males in school language studies? This is particularly serious in relation to the Irish language. It is pronounced also in the case of French.

What are the future language skill needs of Ireland, its citizens, agencies and enterprises? What are the languages of greatest strategic importance to Ireland? The Leaving Certificate has evolved to rank French, German and Spanish – in that order – as the most important modern languages. What other languages should be listed? Is the dominant position of the important language French justified?

Many thousands of Irish people achieve passing grades in languages each year at Leaving Certificate level, the majority, except in the case of the Irish language, at Higher level. What do these achievements at Higher and Ordinary level mean in terms of competencies as measured by the CEFR? For how many of these is the achievement in Leaving Certificate languages a dormant unused one?

What role can Employers, Higher Education Institutions and ETBs play in transforming Leaving Certificate achievement, particularly at Higher level, into a professional functionality and fluency and high CEFR competencies? What role can ETBs play in transforming widespread adult language dormancy into functional competency?

What role can ETBs play in assessing the demand for learning in the languages of immigrant communities? What role should the State play in funding courses in these languages towards recognised qualifications subject to adequate demand and qualified teachers.

The languages Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese, languages of future global and Atlantic importance, hardly feature in the Irish school system. How should a national competence in these languages be built?

What role should the EU advocacy of “EU: 1+2” i.e. the advocacy of the ambition that educated adults should have a mastery of three languages (Mother tongue plus two others) have in National Language Policy? In reality that would be English plus two others in Ireland. What level of CEFR language proficiencies should be targeted for particular individuals?

What future role should communication technologies and broadcasting play in language acquisition and enrichment and in the promotion of a National Language Policy?