



Submission from An Gréasán do Mhúinteoirí Gaeilge, regarding the early enactment review of Junior Cycle Gaeilge, L1 agus L2

Introduction

An Gréasán welcomes the opportunity to take part in this early enactment review of Junior Cycle Gaeilge, L1 and L2.

The survey that SEALBHÚ conducted in conjunction with *An Gréasán* shows teachers' widespread dissatisfaction regarding the Junior Cycle Gaeilge L1 and L2 specifications as they stand. The significant concerns expressed by teachers must be listened to and changes made to the specifications accordingly.

Oral Exam

98% of L1 teachers and 97% of L2 teachers believe that there should be recognition for the speaking work in the grade that students receive from the SEC.

98% of L1 teachers and 96% L2 teachers disagree with the statement "There is no need to introduce an oral exam as part of the Junior Cycle assessment".

We strongly believe that there should be an oral exam. It is a major deficiency that there is not currently an oral exam, and that there is no recognition for the spoken language in the grade that students receive from the SEC. This does not show the appropriate respect for the importance of the spoken word in the acquisition of the language, especially for a minority language like Irish.

It is imperative that there is an oral exam which every student completes. The appropriate recognition must be given to the spoken language in the assessment – classroom-based assessments are not sufficient. The CBA descriptors are not a satisfactory instrument either to assess the standard of students' spoken language appropriately. There may be a significant difference in the standard of Irish that students have in the category 'meets expectations' for example. This does not provide appropriate motivation for students to encourage them to achieve a higher standard of Irish.

The influence of assessment on the learning and teaching of the language, and the 'washback effect' of assessment on classroom practice must be recognised also. If appropriate value is not assigned to the oral work in the examination process, the same emphasis will not be put on this skill in the classroom.

It is evident that there is a need to introduce an oral exam in L1 and L2 schools at Junior Cycle level. Accordingly, a system that is acceptable that ensures that the exam is externally assessed must be found, so that any marks from the oral exam will go towards the final mark. It is essential that recognition is given to the oral work in the grade that students receive from the SEC. It is not satisfactory to continue with things as they are currently. All stakeholders must be consulted regarding this.

* As a point of information, there is inequality between the system for the teaching of Irish and the system for the practical subjects. In the new Junior Cycle, a significant proportion of the marks still go towards presentations, practical work or projects for the practical subjects, as was the case previously under the old system, but the optional oral was removed from Irish when the new Junior Cycle courses were introduced.

Literature

87% of L1 teachers and 82% of L2 teachers are unhappy with the number of texts that must be studied.

There are too many texts to be studied during the course. Because of time restrictions and the number of texts that must be covered, there is not enough time being spent on the acquisition of the other language skills. The number of texts to be studied needs to be reduced significantly. Not enough time is being spent on the acquisition of communication skills in particular.

78% of L1 teachers and 88% of L2 teachers believe that the standard of literature texts is not satisfactory for ordinary level students.

The literature on the course is not suitable for ordinary level students. There are not enough texts suitable for ordinary level students and this therefore means that their learning needs are not being appropriately catered for. An optional ordinary level literature list needs to be provided as an option.

90% of L1 teachers and 94% of L2 teachers believe that the approach that the learning evolves from the literature in every learning unit is not working well

It does not appear that the approach that the learning evolves from the literature in every learning unit is working on a practical level. A full review needs to be conducted of this approach. It must be examined whether a thematic approach would be more practical and more suitable. To exemplify this point, some of the textbook publishers have already returned to a thematic approach.

87% of L1 teachers and 67% of L2 teachers believe that it is not easy to access all the texts on the literature list.

It was difficult to access all the texts on the literature lists. A pdf or online booklet should be made available where all the poems, songs, short stories and plays on the literature lists are provided. Teachers from Ulster also mentioned regularly that there are not enough texts from Ulster on the literature lists.

Learning Outcomes

78% of L1 teachers and 86% of L2 teachers believe that it is not easy to understand the wording of the learning outcomes.

76% of L1 teachers and 85% of L2 teachers are not happy with the number of learning outcomes that are provided in the specification.

The learning outcomes are too broad, too abstract and too ambitious. They are not substantial enough. It is difficult to ascertain their meaning and there are too many of them. The language used is too technical and difficult for students, which means that they are not of practical use daily in the classroom.

93% of L1 teachers and 93% of L2 teachers believe that direction should be provided in relation to the subject content, the themes and the topics that would evolve from the learning outcomes.

Clear direction is needed. There is no information available regarding the subject content, the themes or the topics that would evolve from the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes alone are not sufficient as direction for an externally assessed exam. This created a lot of uncertainty for teachers and students to date. Because of this uncertainty, neither the sample papers which the SEC published in November 2019 or the final exam which students completed in June 2022 correlated with what teachers and students were expecting.

Classroom Based Assessments

94% of L1 teachers and 96% of L2 teachers believe that there should be one CBA and an oral exam (instead of two CBAs)

87% of L1 teachers and 91% of L2 teachers believe that CBA 2 does not prepare students to have a natural conversation with other speakers outside of the classroom.

69% of L1 teachers and 71% of L2 teachers believe that CBA 2 did not provide them with accurate feedback regarding students' speaking skills.

94% of L1 teachers and 90% of L2 teachers believe that one of the CBAs should be completed in second year.

The statistics show that teachers strongly believe that CBAs alone are insufficient to assess students' speaking skills, and that there is a need to introduce an oral exam. It also shows that the majority of teachers believe that CBA 2 does not prepare students to partake in a natural conversation with students outside of the classroom. This is a major weakness. According to teachers, it would be preferable if there was one CBA and a proper oral exam. We are of the opinion that it would be better if one CBA was completed in second year and that if a proper oral was conducted in third year worth 40% of their final grade.

85% of L1 teachers and 95% of L2 teachers believe that the reflective note associated with CBA 1 is too challenging.

Tasks should be pitched at a level which is realistic and suitable for the Irish capabilities of all students. The reflective notes do not cater for the learning needs of ordinary level students in particular.

Assessment Task

91% of L2 teachers believe that the assessment task is not effective in getting students to reflect on their learning.

97% of L2 teachers believe that the assessment task is not at an appropriate standard for the capabilities of ordinary level students, and 85% of L2 teachers believe that the assessment task is not at an appropriate standard for the capabilities of higher level students.

The assessment task is completely inappropriate for L2 students. The language register which would be required for this task is completely unrealistic. Higher order language skills would be required for this task, skills that L2 students would not yet have developed. Additionally, there is no differentiation between higher and ordinary level in the assessment task. There is a massive gulf therefore between the standard expected from ordinary level students in the exam paper and the assessment task.

We strongly recommend that the assessment task for Irish is removed. The practical subjects do not complete an assessment task, instead a percentage of the marks goes towards the practical work completed. It would be much more appropriate for Irish if there was not an assessment task, and that if a percentage of the marks was awarded towards an oral exam instead.

If there was an oral exam, students could be asked a number of questions orally about what they learned during the learning process at a level which is appropriate.

Exam papers

86% of L1 teachers and 95% of L2 teachers believe that the higher level sample paper is not satisfactory as things stand.

78% of L1 teachers and 77% of L2 teachers believe that the ordinary level sample paper is not satisfactory as things stand.

87% of L1 teachers and 95% of L2 teachers believe that too much emphasis is put on literature questions on the higher level sample paper.

98% of L1 teachers and 96% of L2 teachers believe that not enough information has been provided regarding the creative writing genres that students need to know.

The sample examination papers were published too late. The sample papers were not published until November of year three of the course, and only one sample paper was published at each level. This was not satisfactory, and teachers and students were working in the darkness. A marking scheme was not provided either, something else that creates uncertainty.

When the sample papers were published in November 2019 the standard was too difficult for students, and our requests to release further sample papers to give further direction to teachers and students were ignored.

Learning outcomes alone are not sufficient as direction for teachers and students for an external exam like the final Junior Cycle exam. Information must be provided on the subject content, the themes, the topics and the writing genres that students need to know.

It is also important that the language register in the examinations is pitched at the correct level. The language register in the L2 Higher Level examination for example, should be at a level which is realistic for students who are learning the language as a second language at that age. The directions in the questions should be comprehensible and students should be able to manage them. The tasks should be interesting, motivating, and they should be linked to the life and interests of students, the tasks should not be artificial or absurd. Neither the sample papers nor the examinations conducted in June 2022 meet these standards.

The specific needs of the L1 student and the specific needs of the L2 student must be examined in detail again, and specifications and assessments must be developed which properly cater for those specific needs.

When specifications are being developed, the assessment system should be designed in conjunction with the specifications and sample assessment tasks should be provided based on the specifications from the beginning. It is important to provide information on the assessments and to provide examples of the different types of assessment at the start of the process, to help to embed changes and to help change mindsets and teaching strategies.

Implementation of the course

86% of L1 teachers and 88% of L2 teachers were unhappy with the teacher professional development support that was provided.

88% of L1 teachers and 88% of L2 teachers were unhappy with the resources that were provided to support the specification

83% of L1 teachers believe that there are an insufficient number of textbooks for Gaeilge for L1 schools

Information on the literature texts, the classroom-based assessments and the assessment task were not provided early enough. Teachers were getting bits and pieces of information gradually over the three years. Answers were not available when questions were asked. This created a lot of uncertainty and it created a lot of problems with the new course. This was not at all satisfactory.

Too much emphasis was put on theoretical concepts and not enough emphasis was put on practical teaching methods in the teacher professional development workshops. The validity of the teacher professional development support provided must be examined.

The Department of Education, NCCA, SEC and JCT need to work closer together to provide better support and resources for teachers. They should be working closer together to provide information and support regarding the assessment, the literature, the exams etc. at the start, before the implementation of any course.

CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

Although the CEFR is mentioned in the Junior Cycle specifications very generally, it does not seem to be implemented on a practical basis.

Level B2 is mentioned in reference to the L1 course, but it would not seem that this level is realistic at Junior Cycle level, when the learning outcomes in the third level institutions are based around level B2.

Comprehensive research should be conducted on what CEFR level would be realistic at Junior Cycle level for L1 and L2 students, at higher level and at ordinary level. There is a need to review the suitability of the levels currently mentioned.

Conclusion

85% of L1 teachers and 97% of L2 teachers believe that the specification puts too much emphasis on literature

91% of L1 teachers and 96% of L2 teachers are unhappy with the specification overall

90% of L1 teachers and 95% of L2 teachers believe that the specification does not succeed in developing speaking skills and communication skills appropriately

81% of L1 teachers and 89% of L2 teachers believe that there is not enough time over the three years of the course to develop all the language skills properly

It is clear that teachers believe that the specifications are not achieving the aims set out in the specifications. The majority of teachers are unhappy with the specifications overall and the majority of teachers believe that the specifications are not succeeding to properly develop speaking and communication skills. The majority of teachers believe that there is too much emphasis on literature and that there is not enough time over the three-year course to develop all of the language skills properly. These are major weaknesses.

A full review of every aspect of the specifications and the assessments needs to be conducted, and specifications and assessments which are appropriate for the learning and teaching of Irish and for the learning needs of all students today need to be developed. Proper recognition must be given to the spoken language also and a proper emphasis put on communication through Irish.

We must take the opportunity to resolve all of these problems now. We must develop the correct approach to strengthen the learning and teaching of Irish. The NCCA, SEC, Department of Education and the JCT must work together and work with teachers and all of the stakeholders to ensure that we endeavour do the best thing for the Irish language to ensure that its part in society and its future is living and thriving. The significant concerns that teachers and the other stakeholders have expressed must be listened to and we must work together to ensure that significant changes are made to the current system to create a high standard system for the teaching of Irish that will create the next generation of fluent confident Irish speakers.



An Gréasán do Mhúinteoirí Gaeilge 2022

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