

Consultation Report on draft specification for Junior Cycle Irish

For discussion

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1. Introduction

The draft specification for Irish was approved for consultation at Council level in February 2015. The consultation process was launched on March 12th and continued until May 1st, 2015. Feedback was sought from educational and Irish language stakeholders as well as the general public in various ways throughout the process:

- online questionnaire
- consultation event
- focus groups with second level students
- focus groups with ITE students (third level)
- written submissions.

The consultation process was launched with a consultation conference event on March 12th, 2015 in Dublin Castle. The online survey opened on March 16th, 2015 until May 1st, 2015. Focus groups were facilitated with second level students and with student teachers on *Professional Masters in Education* (PME) courses from various Initial Teacher Education (ITE) contexts. The process aims to collect views from a wide range of stakeholders regarding the draft specification. The industrial relations climate that prevailed during the consultation period and the ongoing discussions on junior cycle developments at department level must be noted.

Various means of contact were used to increase the public's awareness of and participation in the consultation process. An advertisement for the consultation process was published on the first page of two websites, *ncca.ie* and *juniorcycle.ie*. Requests were sent via email to Irish language educational partners. Twitter was also used to send regular tweets in Irish and English, and an interview was broadcast on the programme *Adhmhaidin* on Raidió na Gaeltachta to draw further attention to the consultation process in general.

Online Questionnaire

In total, 119 respondents completed the online surveys (Appendix 1) with 63% identifying themselves as working in primary, post-primary or third level settings with Gaeilge, and 38% identifying themselves specifically as teachers of Gaeilge at post-primary level. The survey was made available in

both Irish and English with 94 respondents completing the Irish version and 25 completing the English version. Six written submissions were also received (Appendix 2).

Consultation event

Educational and Irish language stakeholders were invited to the consultation event. Requests to take part were circulated to school management bodies, Irish language organisations, DES, SEC, COGG, third level educators involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and organisations representing teachers, parents and schools (Appendix 3). The programme included a keynote lecture from Dr Muiris Ó Laoire and short presentations from Caitríona Ní Cheallaigh, Cumann na bhFiann and Ionad Óige na hÉireann and Mícheál Ó Foighil, Coláiste Lurgan Manager. Participants were placed randomly in focus groups and independent facilitators led the focus groups (Appendix 4). The feedback at every session was recorded by taking notes on flipcharts. Simultaneous interpretation was available on the day, and one focus group was also facilitated through the medium of English. Although aspects of the draft specification were welcomed, and there was much positive commentary about how professional the approach to date has been, and how professional the document itself is, some challenges and issues of concern were raised. These themes were amongst the most important that emerged from the event:

- range of language competencies / needs in the system
- recognition of native speakers' specific needs in curriculum provision
- recommendations regarding providing three levels: ordinary, higher and another level above higher to provide for the range of competencies
- recommendations to map to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
- concerns about the extra optional short course for Irish
- technology's central role
- the importance of flexibility (flexibility v specificity)
- additional support materials and guidelines
- importance of continuing professional development
- future-proofing – need for regular review of provision implementation

Focus groups – second level students

The right of students to have a voice in developments that pertain to them are recognised in Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*. In cooperation with Dr Paula Flynn from Trinity College Dublin, various sessions were held to consult with second level students on the draft specification for Irish as part of the *Learner/Student Voice* initiative. The NCCA supports Dr Flynn in this initiative and input and feedback has been received from students on a range of curriculum developments to date. This initiative aims to consult with students as experts of their own learning experiences and to consider their insights. It seeks to record the students' voices and insights regarding curriculum developments and the ways in which this can be used to contribute to the development process will be examined. In the case of Irish, it was decided that students would be asked for insights and feedback regarding the draft specification put together by *Meitheal Forbartha na Gaeilge* (the Irish language Development Working Group)¹. Meetings were organised with a mixture of second level students. The students that participated in the focus groups were at different stages in school (from first to sixth year) and they came from various school contexts. Schools were chosen for the focus groups that represented the various teaching contexts that exist in our schools in the context of Irish – schools that function through the medium of Irish, including all Irish-medium schools and Gaeltacht schools, and English-medium schools.

- School A: girls' school in Dublin city (English-medium school)
- School B: Irish-medium school in the southwest
- School C: Gaeltacht school
- School D: Mixed school in Cork city (DEIS status) (English-medium school)²

The same approach was used with each school for the consultation process. A member of the research team was present at each meeting.

The approach was as follows:

1. An initial meeting was arranged with each group to share the aims and foster mutual understanding of the consultation process and the terminology/language to be used. As a

¹ This process began with the draft specification, the students' feedback was not sought for the background paper

² The meetings with schools C and D have still to be completed at this point

result of the first meeting, themes for further discussion were chosen from the aspects and points raised by the students. As mentioned, there was a mixture of junior and senior cycle students in each focus group. Feedback was sought specifically about the following aspects:

- Aspects of the subject they liked and disliked in general and in light of the new draft specification
- Aspects of the curriculum they would/would not keep if they had a choice
- Aims for learning Irish – what should the aims for learning and studying Irish be?
- Aspects they would like to see more of in the curriculum and which would make the subject more attractive, interesting and enjoyable for them
- The most effective ways (in the students' opinions) to evaluate a student's ability in Irish and an evaluation of the tasks discussed in the draft specification

2. In response to this initial discussion, questions were generated to form the basis of focus group sessions intended to prepare responses for the students' second meeting with the research team. (Arrangements were made with each school to facilitate a discussion session for the student groups about the points they raised before that meeting.) This second meeting gave the students an opportunity to discuss their thoughts together so that they could present the most important ideas for them to the research team during the third meeting. At the end of the second meeting the students identified the most important themes/issues that they believed should be included in the feedback on the draft specification. The third and final meeting was student-led and intended to provide the opportunity for students to record their opinions and views on aspects of the draft-specification. The points below are amongst the most significant that emerged from the various focus groups that were held to date:

- The oral evaluation tasks, the spoken task and the interactive conversation, were received positively and welcomed
- Students were very positive about the emphasis on using various types of texts, including multimodal texts, in the draft specification
- It was recommended that it would be beneficial to use modern technology as much as possible as a resource, a link and a medium to support the students in achieving the aims and learning outcomes

Focus groups – ITE students

In April 2015 a focus group was held with student teachers undertaking Irish as a subject in a *Professional Masters in Education* (PME). Students from Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Maynooth University participated in the focus groups. The questions used with other focus groups were also used here and feedback was noted on a flipchart.

This report

This report describes the emergent themes and feedback that came to light from the consultation process in general. The implications for the next steps regarding developing and implementing the specification are laid out. The report is based on detailed analysis of views that were expressed about the draft specification in the online survey, at the consultation event, by the various focus groups and written submissions. The material is dealt in terms of themes that developed throughout the consultation in this report. Quotes from respondents are used as appropriate to clarify or support the various views expressed.

2. Feedback from the consultation

Generally, the draft specification for Irish was welcomed. There was a high level of participation and interest amongst various stakeholders (including Irish language organisations, parents, community groups, educators) in the process. The work of the development group for the past two years was praised and aspects of the draft specification were greatly welcomed. There was much positive commentary about how professional the approach has been, and how professional the document itself is. The strong emphasis on the spoken language in the specification was particularly welcomed. The (second level) students who took part in the focus groups were very taken with the focus of the draft specification and with the type of learning it promotes. Despite that, concerns and considerations were raised and certain challenges that need to be addressed were identified; those are discussed in more detail below.

Rationale and Aim

Overall, respondents were quite positive about the Rationale and Aim as set out in the draft specification. 56% of respondents to the online survey said that they agreed that the Rationale and Aim give a clear account of what the specification sets out to achieve. 61% of respondents agreed that the layout of the specification is clear. Respondents welcomed the emphasis on spoken language, fostering confidence in speaking and the importance of the connection with the Irish language community. The majority of respondents to the online survey indicated that engaging students with the draft specification could be effective or very effective in...

- encouraging students to develop a sense of enjoyment in using Gaeilge (67%)
- encouraging students to develop key skills, including literacy and numeracy skills (66%)
- enabling students to develop more confidence and competence in the spoken language (63%)
- encouraging students to develop a sense of appreciation of the language (69%)

Analysis of participants' feedback at the consultation event shows particular insights and views regarding the Rationale and Aim. It is clear that the majority of participants welcomed the specification and the emphasis in general in the Rationale and Aim, as this participant's feedback demonstrates: *"the draft is headed in the right direction"*.

Again, the focus or emphasis on fostering confidence and encouragement, developing spoken language and the importance of understanding and connecting with the language community was welcomed.

the draft language is encouraging and realistic, it isn't romantic. It understands that teaching Irish is challenging.

Consultation event

However it was recommended that the definition of the Rationale's focus should be clearer, in particular the advantages of learning the Irish language:

The statements seem quite broad, is the place of Irish at the forefront enough? Should it (Aim and Rationale) be more exact?

Consultation event

The Rationale is comprehensive and positive and sets out concisely the status of Irish in Ireland. It also sets out effectively the benefits of learning languages. We believe it would be of great help to place more emphasis on the benefits of learning Irish rather than languages in general, in line with the opinions expressed in the quotation from Seamus Heaney. But it would also be worthwhile to refer to the practical benefits of Irish regarding employment etc. – the reasons pupils should learn Irish – an understanding of our identity, our culture, our literature, and an understanding of our Gaeltacht communities, for example.

Submission

Other respondents stated the importance of scope and broadness in the Rationale and Aim for any subject specification:

The aims can be adapted to every type of pupil... quite wide. Teachers must adapt them.

Consultation event

It was acknowledged that providing appropriate supports (continuing professional development) and resources for teachers and school leaders is particularly important to enable them to achieve the specification's aims. It was also accepted that this specification is "very different from the old syllabus" and therefore that a major change is needed in the approach to learning and teaching Irish, in some classrooms, to achieve the vision of those aims.

Course structure

The course structure as set out in the draft specification complies with the approach recommended for specification development in all subjects across the new junior cycle. Common strands are used for the Primary School Language Curriculum specification and for the specification for junior cycle Irish and English to enhance consistency of experience for the students learning and developing languages.

Respondents to the survey expressed that they agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The layout of the specification is clear (61%)
- There is a clear structure to the strands and elements (58%)
- The Links section of the specification explains how Gaeilge is linked to central features of learning and teaching at junior cycle (67%)
- The Overview section of the specification provides a useful summary of what will be studied (55%)

Examining the feedback from the survey as well as the consultation event and various focus groups shows that the vast majority of respondents agreed that the structure is “*different but effective*” and that they believe the “*major elements*” are included in it. Some respondents mentioned that it would be beneficial for other modern languages to follow this structure as well. Positive views were expressed about the emphasis on the integrated approach for the implementation of the strand and elements, but it was emphasised that teachers must be supported in interpreting the structure and in achieving effective skills integration. Regarding language difficulty only 20% of respondents to the survey agreed that the language was difficult but analysis of the answers to this particular question shows a high level of respondents were neutral about this question (33%) which is noteworthy. Feedback at the consultation event and in focus groups expressed contrasting views on this particular question but overall there was more positive commentary about the document’s readability in participants’ feedback.

Very easy for teachers to read and handle the document

Consultation event

Learning Outcomes

There was a strong level of agreement that the learning outcomes presented across the three strands were appropriate to the development of oral language, reading and writing. Strong support was expressed for the emphasis placed on skills development, both language and learning skills, throughout the specification generally. However, despite this appreciation of skills development within outcomes based specifications-genuine fears and concerns were expressed in relation to the learning outcomes. These concerns can be grouped as follows: general flexibility versus specificity issues, and the scope of the overall specification to meet the ranging needs of language proficiencies within post-primary contexts, these points will be addressed in more detail in the following pages.

An analysis of the responses relating to learning outcomes in the online survey expressed the view that the learning outcomes were clear (63%), appropriate for students in junior cycle (55%), and were not content heavy (48%). Almost 43% of respondents were of the opinion that the learning outcomes enabled students to develop an understanding and appreciation of Gaeilge as part of the heritage of Ireland.

Respondents to the online survey were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the appropriateness of the learning outcomes specified to the development of oral language (encompassing listening and speaking), reading and writing skills. Responses from the online surveys with regard to the appropriateness of learning outcomes within each strand were quite positive.

Strand 1: Oral Language: Listening and Speaking

Strong support was expressed for the emphasis placed on spoken language throughout the specification. Respondents to the online survey indicated they were in agreement or strong agreement with the appropriateness of the learning outcomes housed within the three overlapping elements (communication, content, structure and use of language and language in context) in supporting the development of oral language in junior cycle Gaeilge as follows:

- Communication: Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing (67%)
- Content, Structure and Use of Language (64%)
- The Language in Context (70%)

Strand 2: Reading

Responses were also very positive in relation to the appropriateness of the outcomes presented within the draft, in supporting the development of reading in junior cycle Gaeilge. The majority of respondents expressed that they were in agreement or strong agreement with the outcomes specified for this purpose, as follows:

- Communication: Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing (68%)
- Content, Structure and Use of Language (68%)
- The Language in Context (65%)

Strand 3: Writing

In relation to the writing strand, respondents expressed agreement that the learning outcomes presented across the three elements were appropriate to the development of writing skills in junior cycle Gaeilge, with the majority of respondents in strong agreement:

- Communication: Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing (70%)
- Content, Structure and Use of Language (67%)
- The Language in Context (63%)

An analysis of focus group responses at the consultation event together with the results of the online surveys however, reveals a divergence of opinion in relation to the flexibility afforded by the learning outcomes and an expressed need for greater specificity. Concerns emerged in some of the open questions within the survey and commentary at the event in relation to the challenges this openness may present for teachers using or unpacking outcomes. The freedom the openness presents appears to have generate a sense of apprehension about moving to something new, causing some respondents and participants to look for greater specificity.

Some learning outcomes appear too aspirational and are too generalised; clear, concrete examples should be provided with examples of demonstrations

Gaeilge teacher

Is there enough support for teachers... can it be implemented in the classroom?... a clearer link between the document and the classroom is needed

Consultation event

On the other hand, a majority of respondents and participants expressed strong support for the high level of flexibility associated with the specification and outcomes as detailed, noting the opportunities that this presents for tailoring learning and teaching activities to local interests and needs.

With the freedom set out we should be able to provide for a variety of competencies

Consultation event

They are clear, substantial, ambitious. There should be a ladder but the range needs to be broad

Consultation event

There are a lot of possibilities here. Flexibility is one of the most important aspects at this, the first step, of defining and designing a syllabus...

Online survey

However, it was acknowledged that with freedom and flexibility comes a responsibility to adapt and interpret outcomes at a local level to suit context. With several participants noting this at the consultation event. It was noted by some participants that this flexibility was inherent within the 1989 syllabus however, the potential was not always fully exploited/embraced at school level.

The importance of time, support and resources coupled with the provision of sufficient CPD to support the introduction and implementation of the specification, particularly in relation to the unpacking of learning outcomes, in schools was frequently voiced.

I think the roll out of in-service will be vital in providing for a change to the teaching methods; this had already happened to a certain degree due to the new senior cycle syllabus, but teachers need to see key aspects and their importance in the future of the language

Gaeilge teacher

Scope of the specification

Respondents to the online survey indicated that they were in agreement or strong agreement with the following aspects in relation to the scope of the specification, the draft specification

- provides the flexibility to engage students in work that captures students interests (69%)
- increases the possibilities for students to engage more in communicative tasks (80%)
- increases the opportunities for students to acquire the language through realistic and enjoyable activities (60%)
- provides the scope to cater for students of varying levels of proficiency (43%)

An analysis of responses from the consultation event and student focus groups (second and third level) reveals general consensus echoing the first three findings above, with much positive commentary noting that the draft specification provides greater opportunities to engage in work that captures students' interests. Students involved in the student focus groups expressed great enthusiasm for increased possibilities to engage in more communicative tasks. This was echoed by many participants at the consultation event:

Emphasis on the oral has great potential

Post-primary Principal

Nevertheless, serious concerns emerged in terms of the scope of the overall specification to meet the ranging needs of language proficiencies within post-primary contexts during the consultation exercise, with only 43% of respondents overall noting that they were in agreement that the draft-specification provides the scope to cater for students of varying levels of language proficiency. Strong feelings and frustrations on this issues were voiced at discussions at the consultation conference and in open box responses via the online surveys. On closer inspection, it is evident that there is notable divergence of opinion in relation to this question between responses made via the Gaeilge and English versions of the survey. 64% of respondents on the Gaeilge version of the survey indicating that they disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 60% of respondents via the English version of the survey indicating agreement or strong with the statement. It is important to note this difference, this may be due a more varied group of stakeholders responding to the Gaeilge version of the survey.

As noted there was considerable commentary on this issue from a variety of stakeholders expressing concerns in relation to providing for varying language proficiencies within the curricular provision as outlined in the draft specification. Strong views were expressed on this question, as evidenced in the following:

The whole range of learners, including native speakers, need to be provided for

Consultation event

If goals aren't more challenging for strong learners they will lose interest and hope

Parent

I do not agree it is possible to provide for the various abilities within two levels. I believe the average standard will fall due to the fact that not every student will be studying Irish (according to the learning statements) and that two levels cannot provide for the range between students with special learning needs and native speakers

Submission

With the freedom set out we should be able to provide for a variety of competencies

Consultation event

Outcomes seemed aimed at L1 students in some places, high expectations... concern that the aims at higher level of proficiency... the spread of student ability needs to be recognised more throughout the specification...

Post-primary school principal

Recognising the challenging sociolinguistic contexts that exist, there is emergent consensus from the consultative evidence of the need to retain a high level of flexibility within the provision. However, it is clear that greater consideration is required to identify and provide for the range of language proficiencies, including the needs of native speakers, within the curricular provision for Gaeilge at junior cycle. Many suggestions as to how to effectively provide for the varying range of language proficiencies emerged through open box questions and discussions at the consultation event. With opinion divided on the most appropriate direction no clear preference emerged however, the following were frequently and passionately voiced:

An extra, more challenging level is recommended. The case for Irish and English are not the same, although it is acknowledged that there are English language learners in schools.

Submission

...many pupils do not have an opportunity now for complete language acquisition in Irish as would have happened traditionally. There is an opportunity with the new syllabus to consider this challenge and support children in the Gaeltacht to provide them with the fullest and richest opportunity possible.

Submission

The spread of student ability needs to be recognised more thoroughly throughout the specification... literature and oral should differentiate between native and other learners. This differentiation should be more evident in the spec especially in the assessment section

Post-primary school principal

...investigative research should be undertaken on the most effective way to develop an integrated approach in the primary curriculum to ensure the same approach is implemented at second level...

Submission

The approach to prescribing texts

Feedback was sought from respondents via the online surveys and participants in the various focus groups on the proposed approach to prescribing texts which was outlined as follows:

Students will be given the opportunity to get a taste of literature (in the widest meaning/sense) to support their learning during the three year of junior cycle. Two text lists will be provided to support this goal:

- A recommended list for first year learning with a choice for teachers/students regarding the texts with which they will engage
- Prescribed genres with an internal choice for the second and third year

54% of respondents to the online surveys agreed or strongly agreed that the open choice for first year provides flexibility and scope to cater for students' varying experiences and interests. In

relation to the proposed prescription of texts for second and third year of junior cycle Gaeilge the majority of survey respondents indicated agreement with the proposed approach with the majority of respondents expressing the view that this approach provides scope and freedom to choose texts that are suitable for students' experience, needs and contexts. However, the amount of respondents indicating a neutral stance on both questions is noteworthy here (average of 23%).

Closer analysis of the commentary provided in open boxes within the survey tool and from the consultation event and various focus groups echoes much of the same support as indicated above. There is strong agreement and much positive commentary provided in relation to the provision of choice for teachers and students selecting texts/pieces appropriate to their context, interests and so on:

Refreshing that it allows for engagement of students, all of which is based on academic ability and level ability texts. With a view that after a text has been read, and competency is evident, the student can move to the next level of reading...

Gaeilge teacher

There must be a choice

Online survey

There was strong support evident for the decision to include 'a taste of texts/literature' for all students in junior cycle Gaeilge amongst participants at focus groups and in second level student focus groups also. While many participants acknowledged the need for regular review of material:

I believe it is a good thing to have literature available for every level (this was never provided for until now), it must be changed regularly, revised to ensure it is up-to-date, stimulating, interesting

Consultation event

The focus on literature as a source for teaching the language mar '*foinse teagaisc*' was also cited as positive however, some respondents felt that further emphasis on literature as a social endeavour needed more teasing out within the specification.

...there is a need to emphasise literature as a social practice here – which would concur well with the emphasis on the local community and necessary flexibility...

Online survey

Nevertheless, closer examination of the commentary reveals some divergence of opinion in relation to aspects of the proposed approach and certain suggestions were forthcoming particularly in

relation the providing material suitable and appropriate for native speakers. Some respondents noted that the proposed approach would offer the flexibility to Gaeltacht schools to select local sources of literature that would prove adequately challenging for students.

This flexibility would give Gaeltacht schools the opportunity to use literary texts from their area which would challenge students

Online survey

However, several respondents and participants expressed concern that schools may not fully embrace the freedom but choose to narrow the options and thereby favouring less challenging texts/pieces.

worried the freedom [as set out here] will be curtailed... that Gaeltacht schools will choose to return to the easier option

Consultation event

Some respondents made reference to the important work already undertaken by COGG in this area. Overall, consensus emerged favouring the use of the proposed model for prescription of texts but a strong recommendation was made that this should include differentiated lists of texts to suit various school contexts.

literature should differentiate between native and other learners

Post-primary Principal

Assessment

While there was considerable commentary on the nature, form and suitability of school-based assessment tasks at the consultation event and at student focus groups it is noteworthy that questions relating to assessment had a response rate of just 23% in the online surveys. It is worth noting that at the time of the consultation, talks are ongoing between the teacher unions and the Department of Education and Skills in relation to assessment, which may have an impact on respondents' engagement with this section of the online survey. Conflicting views were expressed as to whether the assessment components would be effective in assessing students' learning in junior cycle. A high percentage of respondents were undecided but of those who expressed an opinion, a narrow majority of respondents in each case indicated that assessment components as set out would be effective:

- in supporting the type of learning the rationale sets out to achieve (36%)

- in assessing students' learning in junior cycle Gaeilge (41%)
- in capturing evidence of learning in junior cycle Gaeilge (37%)

Concerns surrounding time, manageability, language proficiency amongst teachers and support and CPD in relation to assessment aspects also emerged.

Teachers need particular training to complete this work – how the native speaker learns, how to teach Irish pronunciation, expertise of Irish grammar

Online survey

Concerns and considerations in relation the suitability of the assessment tasks for use in L1 contexts were also frequently voiced. Some respondents were of the view that the oral tasks, as proposed, would not prove challenging enough for native speakers with others expressing concern that oral tasks were not the most suitable for assessing students in L1 contexts.

The tasks must be focused on the specific needs of L1 or L2 students

Online survey

Indeed participants frequently commented on the need for greater differentiation in relation to the assessment tasks to adequately and appropriately provide for the range of language proficiencies with some respondents and participants suggesting mapping provision to the Common European Framework of References (CEFR). It was suggested that the features of quality associated with each of the tasks were too ambitious and require further consideration.

An analysis of the feedback from all sources reveals much support for the proposed oral assessment components in particular, with participants commenting on the potential associated with these tasks to support learning and development of students' language competence. The oral tasks were very well received in student focus groups (both second and third level) with high levels of enthusiasm expressed for both the spoken task and the interactive conversation. The incorporation of research, the element of choice for the student in relation to the topic and medium of delivering the presentation were welcomed. Nonetheless many participants and respondents commented on the need to ensure that the tasks provide opportunities for *fíorchumarsáid*.

Must be careful about prepared material... learning by heart... thinking on the spot should be part of the assessment

Consultation event

Some respondents and participants suggested that junior cycle Gaeilge should include a trip to a Gaeltacht area.

Oral tasks should be assessed with a completion of a trip to a Gaeltacht area

Gaeilge teacher

Concerns were also raised in relation to the common level of tasks within the school-based component. The Framework for Junior Cycle stipulates that school-based components for all subjects are offered at common level. There were a number of comments expressing dissatisfaction with this development.

The written task received something of a mixed reaction. With some participants suggesting that the task was somewhat at odds with the communicative aim of the specification and proposing that the school-based component focus purely on communicative/oral tasks. However other participants suggested incorporating a written element into one of the oral tasks rather than removing the task completely.

Short course

This consultation focused specifically on the subject specification however, strong opinions emerged about the additional short course for Irish during the process. The Junior Cycle Framework sets out that the curriculum provision for Irish will be enriched by providing an extra, optional short course. There was a variety of views voiced and strong opinions expressed about the suitability of a short course to expand/enrich the curriculum provision. This is clear from the evidence below:

the decision to provide L1 pupils with an optional extra short course should be revised... We recommend three levels to provide for the wide range of abilities from L1 native speakers to L2 low ability pupils, and that an optional short course is provided for other aspects of the language (in-depth study of literature or applied Irish for the workplace).

Submission

Regarding the Short Course, this would be an option for schools with no external assessment. Therefore, it would have no recognition from the State Examinations Commission. Some schools will choose to do this and others will not but, whichever choice is made, it is not the solution to an inappropriate course for students in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools.

Submission

The Forum's considered opinion is that few Gaeltacht pupils would choose such a course: that would reduce the amount of other attractive subjects they could choose... why must an extra course be chosen to achieve high competency: should that not be part of a good complete course in any case?

Submission

Very pleased with draft spec particularly the short course for literature and the single terminal assessment. The oral assessment represents an improvement on the current exam also.

Gaeilge teacher

Range of Language Proficiencies

The main theme emerging from the consultation is the central importance of adequately providing for the range of language proficiencies and progressions, native speakers included, within curricular provision at junior cycle Gaeilge. The draft specification is welcome but further consideration as to how best to identify varying learning progressions, linguistic backgrounds and proficiencies is required acknowledging the need to retain and reflect the emphasis on flexibility to allow for successful local implementation and interpretation.

...flexibility in teaching and assessment in particular should be prioritised... The Irish language curriculum is local at the end of the day. The curriculum is based locally in the school and learner. That must be included as well as more scope for the various language competencies and different backgrounds. The continuity between the learner's experience of learning the language in primary school should also be included in that flexibility.

Online survey

Pedagogy, Learning and Teaching

Another key theme emerging from the consultation surrounds the approaches to learning and teaching that will be required to realise the potential presented by the draft-specification in the classroom and the varying factors that influence and affect pedagogy. The theme of pedagogy, learning and teaching can be divided into the following sub-themes:

- approaches to learning and teaching
- support & innovative resources
- CPD
- assessment balance

Approaches to Learning and Teaching

The importance of supporting schools and teachers to embrace and implement the vision of the draft-specification was the subject of much discussion and comment throughout the process. It was noted that the draft specification is “*very different from the old syllabus*” and will require different teaching approaches and methodologies in many classrooms to ensure the vision/aim is realised in classrooms particularly in relation to the classroom as an “*active communication space*”:

*Everything is going in the right direction – the emphasis on language awareness, learning awareness and the toolkit. The specification’s central spirit can be seen on page 17 where the classroom is an active communication space with interactive activities based on text discussion. I see possibilities to improve here. I believe this “vision” or stimulation is very important and that we should keep it to the fore. Nothing encourages learners more than progress. It is easier to acquire any language in the language community’s natural environment, while the learner is involved in ordinary relationships, than in school. No matter how great any school is, language teaching in the classroom is very challenging, since there are often so many changeable dimensions and complications, including: the learner’s aptitude, attitude and interest, intensity of inspiration, curriculum and assessment, teaching and learning long- and short-term goals, the learner’s background and learning style, etc. In the case of Irish as first and second language, where there is no vigorous widespread speaking community, we depend a lot on the educational system to pass the language on from one generation to the next to ensure the language’s viability. **Therefore the classroom needs to be a credible and natural communicative space.** [Emphasis added]*

Online survey

It was also noted that initial teacher education has a role to play in supporting the adoption of new pedagogical approaches.

Supports and innovative resources

Much comment focused on the provision and availability of innovative, technology resources in order to support the learning, teaching and assessing of Gaeilge as proposed in the draft specification, with many respondents and participants also looking for more detail on support material.

The draft plan for the new syllabus places the greatest emphasis on fostering confidence, inspiring, encouraging and enabling speakers. These aims are noble and to be commended but they will never be more than ambitions in a document without practical ways to implement them... since education leaders are seeking confidence and encouragement from the young learners, should the same tangible characteristics not be in the new syllabus' approach? This is the time to bring radical thinking into Irish language teaching and learning.

Submission

Continuous Professional Development

The central importance of the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) for supporting the introduction and implementation of the Gaeilge specification emerged as a theme. While some concern was expressed about the language proficiency of some Gaeilge teachers it was suggested that providing greater opportunities for participation in professional networks and conversations as well as further development opportunities would prove beneficial. On the other hand, many participants acknowledged the good practice and approaches that exists in many schools and classrooms emphasising the need to provide opportunities to share best practice and build upon these practices and experiences.

As the Draft Specification's approach represents a big change, especially the emphasis on continuous assessment and communication (spoken Irish), ... it is very important that a comprehensive training course be made available for teachers, to ensure they are enabled to adapt their methodology to the curriculum needs, and make Irish language learning inspiring and enjoyable. It would also be very important to provide them with development opportunities to improve their standard of Irish so that they can use Irish as a language of teaching and communication in the classroom and in the school in general.

Submission

Assessment

Assessment emerged as a sub-theme within the consultation. Much commentary focused on the possibilities and challenges associated with the school-based assessment components. The alignment and reflection of the aims in the assessment components, both school-based and final, is recognised as key in terms of having a positive effect on pedagogical approaches in classrooms to provide for greater opportunities for communication.

3. Implications of the consultation

It was evident from the consultation that aspects of the draft specification are welcome. The consultation process was very affirming of the work of the NCCA *Meitheal Forbartha na Gaeilge* for Junior Cycle. This section of the report looks at ways in which progress can be made on some of the issues raised.

Areas for further consideration

The consultation revealed some constructive and considered concerns about particular sections of the specification. The following areas will be require further consideration:

- Recognising, identifying and meeting the wide range of language proficiencies, native speakers included
- Role of the optional short course as a means to enrich the provision
- Possibilities and challenges associated with mapping to a framework such as the CEFR
- Improving continuity for language learners from primary to post-primary
- Review of Rationale to make it more relevant, concise and clearly aligned to the context of learning Gaeilge
- Need for exemplar materials that will help teachers to interpret and unpack the learning outcomes
- Suggested amendments to the features of quality

Conclusion

The consultation process was very informative and beneficial. While many teachers were unable to participate at this time, the level of engagement of those who did and of participants from such a wide variety of stakeholders must be acknowledged and NCCA is grateful for the open, honest, committed and experienced-based expert feedback received.

Echoing the initial consultation of the background paper, this consultation established that supporting teachers in dealing with the pedagogical changes and challenges they may face in implementation is key to realising the aims and vision of the specification in practice. While also emphasising the need to ensure greater consistency for learners of Gaeilge from the primary to post-primary setting, investigating possibilities for greater differentiation in learning, teaching and assessments in L1/L2 contexts.

Appendix 1

Online questionnaire (English)

Introduction

The aim of this process is to hear the views of teachers/parents/students and interested parties on the draft curriculum and assessment specification for junior cycle Gaelige. This consultation will involve gathering feedback through this survey, a consultation conference (12th March) and targeted meetings.

The NCCA would greatly appreciate your feedback which will inform the work of the Gaelige Development Group. Please read the draft specification which can be accessed [here](#). Then complete this questionnaire as fully as possible but feel free to skip any item that is not relevant to you.

Participant's details

*1. I am responding as a ...

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Gaelige Teacher | <input type="radio"/> Third level student |
| <input type="radio"/> Non-Gaelige Teacher (Post-primary) | <input type="radio"/> Parent/ Guardian |
| <input type="radio"/> Primary teacher | <input type="radio"/> Teacher educator |
| <input type="radio"/> Principal/ Deputy Principal (Post-primary) | <input type="radio"/> Pre-service Teacher |
| <input type="radio"/> Principal/ Deputy Principal (Primary) | <input type="radio"/> Third level lecturer/researcher |
| <input type="radio"/> Second level student | <input type="radio"/> Other |

Other (please specify)

2. Responding on behalf of ... (if applicable)

3. School type (if applicable)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Voluntary secondary school | <input type="radio"/> Vocational school |
| <input type="radio"/> Community school | <input type="radio"/> Community college |
| <input type="radio"/> Comprehensive school | <input type="radio"/> Other |

Other (please specify)

4. Did you participate in the consultation on the Background paper for Junior Cycle Gaelige?

- Yes
- No

5. You can provide your name and email address to enable us to follow up on particular issues that you may identify. However, the survey data will be anonymised and we will ensure that no views that you articulate will be attributed to you or your school or be reported in any way that would allow you or your school to be identified.

Name

Email address

6. If you represent an organisation and wish to have your organisation's submission and name published as part of this consultation process, please complete the details below

Organisation name

Name of representative

General Information

In this section of the survey we invite you to comment on your overall response to the draft specification

7. Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The Rationale and Aim sections gives me a clear account of what the specification sets out to achieve	<input type="radio"/>				
The layout of the specification is unclear	<input type="radio"/>				
The Links section of the specification explains how Gaelige is linked to central features of learning and teaching at junior cycle.	<input type="radio"/>				
The Overview section of the specification provides a useful summary of what will be studied	<input type="radio"/>				
There is a clear structure to the strands and elements	<input type="radio"/>				
The Learning Outcomes are clear	<input type="radio"/>				
The language is difficult to understand	<input type="radio"/>				
The assessment section provides me with a good understanding of the assessment demands of junior cycle Gaelige	<input type="radio"/>				

Rationale and Aim

The Rationale and Aim for junior cycle Gaelige were drafted to reflect and elaborate on the purposes for junior cycle Gaelige

8. Engaging students with junior cycle Gaelige as set out in the draft specification for junior cycle Gaelige can be...

- ...very effective in encouraging students to develop a sense of enjoyment in using Gaelige
- ...effective in encouraging students to develop a sense of enjoyment in using Gaelige
- ...ineffective in encouraging students to develop a sense of enjoyment in using Gaelige
- ...very ineffective in encouraging students to develop a sense of enjoyment in using Gaelige

9. Engaging students with junior cycle Gaelige as set out in the draft specification for junior cycle Gaelige can be...

- ...very effective in encouraging students to develop key skills, including literacy and numeracy skills
- ...effective in encouraging students to develop key skills, including literacy and numeracy skills
- ...ineffective in encouraging students to develop key skills, including literacy and numeracy skills
- ...very ineffective in encouraging students to develop key skills, including literacy and numeracy skills

10. Engaging students with junior cycle Gaelige as set out in the draft specification for junior cycle Gaelige can be...

- ...very effective in enabling students to develop greater confidence and competence speaking Irish
- ...effective in enabling students to develop greater confidence and competence speaking Irish
- ...ineffective in enabling students to develop greater confidence and competence speaking Irish
- ...very ineffective in enabling students to develop greater confidence and competence speaking Irish

11. Engaging students with junior cycle Gaelige as set out in the draft specification for junior cycle Gaelige can be...

- ...very effective in encouraging students to develop a sense of appreciation of the language
- ...effective in enabling students to develop a sense of appreciation of the language
- ...ineffective in enabling students to develop a sense of appreciation of the language
- ...very ineffective in enabling students to develop a sense of appreciation of the language

Engagement

Feedback from the consultation on the background paper and development work thus far, emphasised the need to improve learner engagement with and enjoyment of Gaelige, this included reference to ensuring the specification can cater for students of varying levels of language proficiency

12. Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The draft specification provides the flexibility to engage students in work that captures students' interests	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The draft specification increases the possibilities for students to engage more in communicative tasks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The draft specification increases the opportunities for students to acquire the language through realistic and enjoyable activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The draft specification provides the scope to cater for students of varying levels of language proficiency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If you wish, please outline any additional comments here

Course structure - Strands and Elements

The specification for junior cycle Gaeilge focuses on the development of language and literacy through three integrated strands: Oral language: incorporating both Listening and Speaking, Reading and Writing

13. Strand 1: Oral Language: Listening and Speaking

Please respond to the following statements showing your level of agreement with the appropriateness of the learning outcomes in supporting the development of oral language in Junior Cycle Gaeilge for each of the elements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Communication – listening, speaking, reading, writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Content, structure and use of language	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language in context	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Additional comments	<input type="text"/>			

14. Strand 2: Reading

Please respond to the following statements showing your level of agreement with the appropriateness of the learning outcomes in supporting the development of reading in Junior Cycle Gaeilge for each of the elements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Communication – listening, speaking, reading, writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Content, structure and use of language	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language in context	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Additional comments	<input type="text"/>			

15. Strand 3: Writing

Please respond to the following statements showing your level of agreement with the appropriateness of the learning outcomes in supporting the development of writing in Junior Cycle Gaelige for each of the elements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Communication – listening, speaking, reading, writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Content, structure and use of language	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language in context	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If you wish to add further comments in relation to how the draft specification could be structured please do so in the space below

Learning outcomes

16. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

The learning outcomes in the draft specification...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
...are appropriate for students of Gaelige in junior cycle Please tell us why	<input type="radio"/>				
...are not content heavy Please tell us why	<input type="radio"/>				
...are unclear in describing the understanding, skills and values students should be able to demonstrate Please tell us why	<input type="radio"/>				
...support students in developing both their language and their learning skills Please tell us why	<input type="radio"/>				
...enable students to develop an understanding and appreciation of Gaelige as part of the heritage of Ireland Please tell us why	<input type="radio"/>				

Assessment

There are two assessment components in junior cycle Gaelige: the School Work Component and Final Assessment. The consultation on the Background paper revealed that:

- there was a broad welcome for the potential to include a variety of modes of assessment
- greater emphasis be placed on assessing oral competence

17. Using this 5-point scale (1 = very ineffective, and 5 = very effective) please rate how the assessment components as set out in the draft specification will be effective...

	Rating
...in supporting the type of learning the rationale sets out to achieve	<input type="text"/>
...in assessing students' learning in junior cycle Gaelige	<input type="text"/>
...in capturing evidence of learning in junior cycle Gaelige	<input type="text"/>

If you wish, please outline any additional comments you may have regarding the assessment components.

18. Regarding the assessment tasks (oral task/interactive conversation and written task) in the school work component for junior cycle Gaelige.

Using this 5-point scale (1 = very inappropriate, and 5 = very appropriate) please rate the appropriateness of each of these tasks in assessing students' learning in junior cycle Gaelige.

	Rating
Oral task	<input type="text"/>
Interactive conversation	<input type="text"/>
Written task	<input type="text"/>

Please specify the task and suggest improvements in the space provided.

19. Regarding the proposed number of assessment tasks in the school work component for junior cycle Gaelige, please select one of the following statements.

- The number of tasks is about right
- I think there should be fewer tasks
- I think there should be a greater number of assessment tasks

You may wish to add further comments in relation to assessment in junior cycle Gaelige. If so, please use the space below.

Approach to prescribing texts

Students will be given the opportunity to get a taste of literature (in the widest meaning/sense) to support their learning during the three year of junior cycle. Two text lists will be provided to support this goal.

- A recommended list for first year learning with a choice for teachers/students regarding the texts with which they will engage
- Prescribed genres with an internal choice for the second and third year

20. The open choice in first year provide the flexibility/scope to cater for students' varying experiences and interests

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

Additional comments in relation to literature and the approach to prescribing texts

21. Providing an internal choice within the prescribed list for second and third year provides scope and freedom to choose texts that are suitable for students experience/contexts/needs

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

Additional comments on literature or approach to prescribing texts

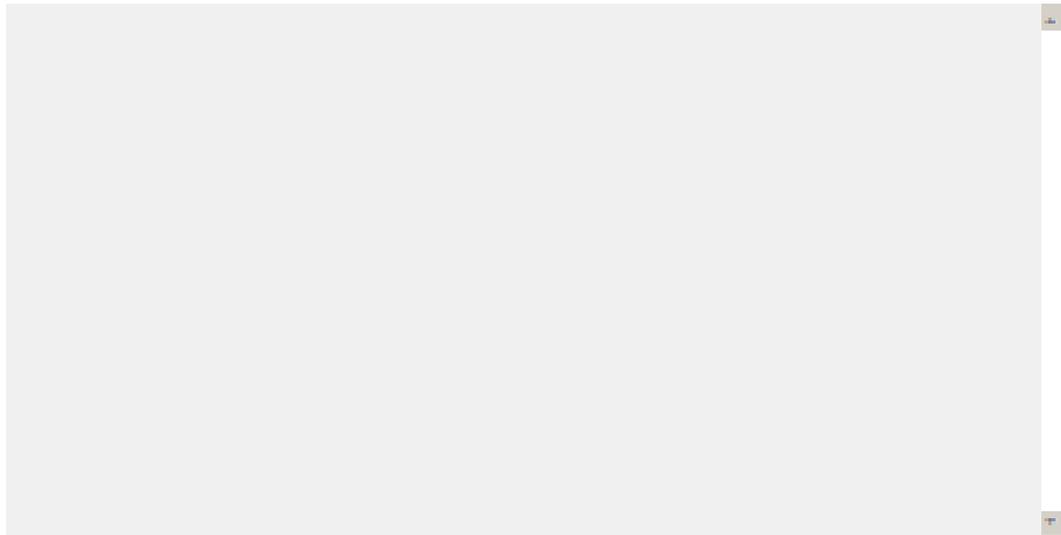
Suggestions for improvement

22. In your opinion, are there areas of the specification that should be revised?

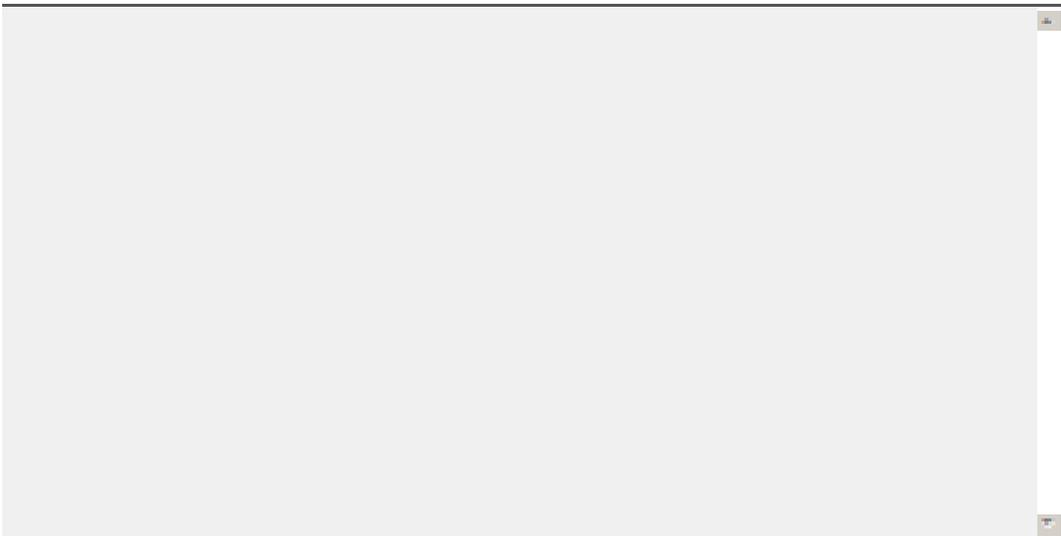
Yes

No

If yes, please specify which area(s), explain why these changes should be made, and suggest improvements to this area of the specification.

A large, empty rectangular text area with a light gray background and a thin black border. It is intended for users to provide detailed feedback on the specification if they answered 'Yes' to question 22.

23. In this final section we invite you to comment on the scope of the specification and its implications for students and teachers. Please include any other general comments that you might wish to make here also.

A large, empty rectangular text area with a light gray background and a thin black border. It is intended for users to provide general comments on the scope and implications of the specification.

Appendix 2

Written submissions

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

Conradh na Gaeilge

Fóram Chois Fharraige um Phleanáil Teanga

Foras na Gaeilge

Gaelscoileanna Teoranta

Mícheál Ó Foighil, Stiúrthóir Choláiste Lurgan

Appendix 3

List of organisations/institutions represented at Consultation Conference Event

An Chomhairle Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)

Coláiste Lurgan

Coláiste na bhFiann

Conradh na Gaeilge

Department of Education and Skills

Hibernia College Dublin

Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC)

Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)

Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

School of Education, National University of Ireland, Galway,

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

State Examinations Commission (SEC)

Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta

Appendix 4

Focus group questions

1. What were your initial impressions of the draft specification?
2. What are your views on the Rationale and Aim as set out in the draft specification?
3. What are your views on the Course Structure as set out in the draft specification?
4. In what ways can the draft specification cater for students of all levels of language proficiency?
5. What are your views on the Learning Outcomes as set out?
6. Are the assessment tasks aligned with the stated aims and appropriate for Junior Cycle Gaeilge?
7. In what way does the proposed approach to prescribing texts provide scope to cater for the varying experiences and interests of students?

