

Driving Motivation in Irish Language Learning: An analysis of variation in post-primary pupil attitudes to Irish in the Growing Up in Ireland study

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Abstract

This study provides a novel perspective on minority language motivation using Situated Expectancy Value Theory to examine the attitudes of post-primary students in Ireland to learning the national minority language, Irish. The paper uses data from Growing Up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of the well-being and development of children and young people in Ireland, to explore factors influencing young people's motivation in relation to learning the Irish language, controlling for overall engagement with schooling. Using data from over 7000 students surveyed at two time points, the findings suggest that young people's attitudes to learning Irish remain relatively stable over time, from primary to post-primary. The analysis demonstrates that the language of schooling (English or Irish) is the factor which relates most closely to attitudes to Irish. Furthermore, contextual classroom factors were of critical importance in sustaining motivation in relation to the language. In particular, a more student-centred teaching style and higher positive and lower negative interactions with teachers were associated with more positive perceptions of Irish as less difficult and more interesting. This paper informs key policy priorities to support the maintenance of the Irish language by optimising interest-enjoyment value and minimising the challenges associated with learning Irish for young people in post-primary education.

Keywords: motivation, Irish, interest, difficulty, teaching style

1. Introduction

Attitude and motivation are closely linked with language achievement (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012; Harris & Murtagh, 1999). The present study examines two aspects of motivation – perceived difficulty and interest - in the context of Irish language learning, and the contextual factors that predict each in Irish post-primary school students using data from Growing Up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children and young people in Ireland (Thornton et al, 2016).

There is typically a negative relationship between interest and perceived difficulty; students who perceive a task or topic to be more difficult are less interested in undertaking it (Brown, 2018). Perceived difficulty, in turn, is negatively associated with engagement (Patall et al, 2018) as well as attainment (van Steensel, Oostdam, & van Gelderen, 2019). In contrast, subject-specific interest is positively associated with academic achievement (Jansen, Lüdtke, & Schroeders, 2016).

Interest and difficulty, however, are just two dimensions which influence motivation. In order to unpack these inter-related dimensions, we employ Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020) to facilitate a broader discussion of motivation in the minority language context of Ireland. The EVT framework includes two main constructs: 1) expectancy-related beliefs which are defined as students' beliefs in how well they will do on language tasks and 2) subjective task values. We focus on the four subjective task values:

1. attainment value, defined as the “personal/identity-based importance” (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020, p. 5) a student places on doing well at a given task;
2. interest-enjoyment value, which is measured by students' interest in – and enjoyment derived from – the task;
3. utility value, which relates to how well the gains derived from the task will align with a students' future plans;
4. cost, which describes how much effort it will take to complete the task as well as the opportunity cost in doing so.

These aspects of motivation are analysed in the context of students' general engagement in school. Separate analyses are presented for students who demonstrate (i) higher and (ii) lower engagement with school, given that engagement and disengagement are separable

constructs associated with distinct learning outcomes (Fredricks, Filsecker, and Lawson, 2016).

1.1 The Irish context

Ireland's educational landscape is evolving through policies that enhance both modern foreign language (MFL) and Irish language education. The Languages Connect Strategy (2017) aims to boost language competence and encourage MFL uptake in schools, while the Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta (2017-2022) focuses on quality Irish-medium (IM) education in Gaeltacht areas and supports Irish as the community language. A new policy for IM education outside the Gaeltacht is also being developed.

Significant curricular developments are also underway. First, the re-introduction of MFL into the Primary Language Curriculum promotes a plurilingual approach that values linguistic and cultural diversity (NCCA, 2024). Second, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) pilot programs are being introduced, with commitments from both the Languages Connect Strategy and the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language (2010-2030) to explore CLIL's potential. A three-year CLIL project launched in 2019 aims to enhance English-medium (EM) primary students' competence in Irish (DE, 2020). CLIL is associated with higher motivation for second language learning in Irish (Ó Ceallaigh, Ní Mhurchú & Ní Chróinín, 2017), and challenges students more effectively than traditional methods (Buckingham & Iwanierc, 2024).

Recent chief inspector reports reveal disparities in educational outcomes between IM and English-medium (EM) contexts. In primary IM schools, Irish learning outcomes are generally positive, while concerns persist in EM schools, despite students' favourable attitudes toward Irish (DE, 2020). At the post-primary level, students in IM schools engage

positively with the language (DE, 2021), though EM schools struggle to meet quality standards (DE, 2020).

The IM sector faces challenges, notably the need for teachers proficient in Irish (DE, 2022). Efforts have been made to improve this through funded initial teacher education and master's programs. The linguistic competence of teachers is crucial, especially outside the Gaeltacht, where they serve as primary language models (Nig Uidhir & Ó Ceallaigh, 2023). Strengthening Irish as a social language and providing support for parents' language development is a key recommendation for future policy (Ó Duibhir et al, 2023). This is timely given that parents report Irish and Maths as the subjects in which they have most difficulty supporting homework (Martinez Sainz et al, 2023).

1.2 Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) in the Irish context

The expectancy-value theory described in the introduction has recently been broadened and renamed the Situated Expectancy Value Theory (SEVT: Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). This model takes into account that the factors contributing to motivation are contextual and situative. We discuss three such factors: (i) the sociolinguistic context of Ireland (ii) school-related factors and (iii) personal characteristics, self-schemata and the cultural milieu.

1.3 Sociolinguistic context

A significant majority of the population (60-70%) regard the language positively (Darmody & Daly, 2015; Mac Gréil & Rhatigan, 2009) and believe that Irish should be preserved or revived (Mac Gréil & Rhatigan, 2009). The majority of adults believe that it is important that their children grow up knowing Irish (Ó Riagáin, 2007), that Irish should be taught to all children as a school subject (Darmody & Daly, 2015), and support the establishment of IM schools (Darmody & Daly, 2015). Surveys of attitudes towards Irish have found that positive

stances tend to correlate with markers of higher SES and ability in Irish (Darmody & Daly, 2015).

Despite the positive regard for Irish, research illustrates an underlying ambivalence towards learning the language. Primary level students are less positive in their attitudes to the learning process than in their attitudes to the language itself and to its speakers (Harris & Murtagh, 1999). Even in IM primary schools, a discrepancy exists between pupils' (passive) positive attitudes to learning Irish and their (active) commitment to learning Irish (Ó Duibhir, 2009). Pupils present lower engagement with Irish than other subjects over and above levels of general engagement with schooling (Devitt et al, 2018). Primary students rate Irish as less useful than other core subjects such as English and Maths; however, they do identify the importance of maintaining Irish from a cultural point of view (Martinez-Sainz et al, 2023).

At post-primary level, students' motivation to learn the language is also low (Murtagh, 2007). Students at post-primary level view Irish as their least interesting, least useful subject and most difficult subject (Smyth, 2006). Irish as a subject has also been rated less positively than Reading and Mathematics in a longitudinal study of teaching and learning (McCoy, Smyth, & Banks, 2012). The context of the Irish language in Ireland can be expressed in SEVT terms as follows: Irish is viewed as having relatively high attainment value as regards Irish cultural identity but low utility value relative to English for example, a high relative cost, and low interest-enjoyment value.

1.4 School and Classroom factors

At the post-primary level, students' motivation varies by school type and course of study. In English-medium schools, those studying the higher-level syllabus show more favourable attitudes towards Irish than those in ordinary-level courses, while IM students demonstrate significantly higher motivation to learn Irish than their EM peers (Murtagh, 2007). Similarly,

primary pupils in IM schools exhibit positive attitudes toward learning the language (Devitt et al., 2018; Harris & Murtagh, 1999; Ó Duibhir, 2012). Socioeconomic context also plays a role; students in disadvantaged EM schools score notably lower in Irish proficiency than their peers in more advantaged schools (Harris et al., 2006).

The quality of student-teacher relationships is crucial for engagement. Positive relationships lead to higher school involvement (Roorda et al., 2017). Notably, students report weaker connections with teachers in their most challenging subjects (Roorda et al., 2019). Teaching styles also impact motivation, with modern, learner-centered approaches fostering autonomy and engagement, while traditional methods can lead to disengagement (Reeve & Shin, 2020). Autonomy-supportive teaching enhances motivation (Reeve, 2009) and reduces perceived difficulty (Parrisius et al., 2022).

Student-teacher relationships are vital for language-learning motivation. In Ó Duibhir's (2009) study, Irish-medium primary pupils cited teacher-related factors as key to their enjoyment of learning Irish, alongside support from parents and family. The Children's Lives Study (Devine et al., 2023) indicates that primary students feel generally supported but perceive that learning decisions are primarily teacher-driven. Many express a desire for more support from teachers in Irish, particularly regarding pronunciation and comprehension (Martinez-Sainz et al., 2023).

1.5 Personal characteristics, self-schemata and cultural milieu

In Ireland, socioeconomic background has been found to be strongly associated with attitudes to Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1999; Ó Riagáin, 2007). In primary schools, girls tend to outperform boys in measures of Irish language proficiency (Harris et al., 2006), although gender is not predictive of engagement with Irish at primary school (Devitt et al., 2018). In relation to the attitudes of students from a migrant background towards Irish, contrasting

findings have been obtained. Factors related to ethnicity were not predictive of disengagement with Irish at school in younger (9-year-old) children (Devitt et al., 2018). However, older (13-year-old) students who have migrant mothers are marginally more likely to find Irish not interesting than their non-migrant peers (Smyth & Darmody, 2016). In summary, varied factors at societal, school, household and individual level may impact motivation and engagement.

2. Method

The present study examines the following research questions:

1. Which school, classroom, and demographic factors are associated with (i) the perceived difficulty of and (ii) interest in learning the Irish language among post-primary school students in Ireland?
2. How do the school, classroom, and demographic factors associated with the perceived difficulty of learning the Irish language differ based on the overall level of school engagement (higher vs. lower) among post-primary school students in Ireland?

The rationale for this study is to explore various factors that may influence students' perceived difficulty and interest in the Irish language, with the aim of highlighting potential levers for influence in language education. The data comes from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, a longitudinal survey of child development in Ireland, involving 8568 nine-year-old students in Wave 1 (2007-2008) and 7525 students four years later in Wave 2.

Motivation for Irish in Wave 2 was measured by two survey items: perceived difficulty ("Difficult, OK, Not Difficult") and interest ("Interesting, OK, Not Interesting"). Irish was most often rated as difficult (26%) compared to mathematics, science, and English (13%, 18%, and 4%), and least interesting (32%) compared to these subjects (20%, 13%, and 11%). Irish was

also the least favourite subject (29%) compared to mathematics (14%), science (7%), and English (4%).

To investigate factors specific to Irish, the study divides students into two cohorts based on general school engagement: a higher engagement (HE) cohort of 4414 students and a lower engagement (LE) cohort of 2614 students (see Smyth, 2006, for an analysis of factors related to school engagement more broadly). The HE cohort had more girls and students from higher socio-economic backgrounds; these differences are corrected for in the regressions reported below by including them as independent variables in the analyses. Table 1 shows the relationship between the constructs of perceived difficulty and interest in Irish. There is a strong association between the two items (Cramer's $V = 0.36$) where those who find Irish difficult also tend to find it uninteresting and those who find it not difficult tend to find it interesting. Nevertheless, 45% of responses are discordant across the two survey items indicating that while related, the two items measure different aspects of learners' motivation for Irish.

Table 1

Relationship between perceived difficulty and interest in Irish

Frequency (%)	Interest		
	Not interesting	OK	Interesting
Perceived difficulty			
Difficult	1069 (66)	448 (28)	92 (6)
OK	773 (24)	1844 (58)	569 (18)
Not difficult	268 (12)	986 (44)	979 (44)

* percentages add to 100% in each row (N=7028).

2.1 Data Analysis

Ordinal logistic regression was used to model the relationships between the dependent variables with 31 independent variables that covered the thematic areas listed below. Ordinal logistic regression is a method used to analyse relationships between an ordered categorical dependent variable (e.g. the response categories interesting, OK and not interesting) and several independent variables (in this case, the various school, classroom and demographic variables listed below). Such regression models allow for the estimation of the strength of association between the independent and dependent variables in a multifactorial setting. The results indicate the strength of evidence for and nature of the relationship between each independent variable and the likelihood of a student finding Irish *interesting*, *OK* or *not interesting* (or *difficult*, *OK* or *not difficult*), while controlling for other possible effects.

1. **Irish in school.** This covered the experiences of the students with Irish in school and included the following independent variables: Irish as the language of schooling at primary, post-primary or both/none; attitude of the student to Irish at age 9; Irish level being studied (higher, ordinary/other, not yet decided).
2. **School demographic characteristics.** This covered school-level features including: School type and gender mix; English as an additional language provision in school; school size; percentage of student body that are foreign nationals; DEIS status of school; non-fee paying or fee-paying school.
3. **Classroom environment.** This theme looked at the exposure of the student to child-centred and traditional teaching styles in school.
4. **Student experience.** This included features of the individual's experience of school including: levels of transition difficulties from primary to post-primary school; levels of positive/negative interactions with teachers; average time spent doing homework;

level of parental support with homework; modern languages being studied by the child.

5. **Child/family characteristics.** This covered features of the individual child and their family context including: literacy attainment at aged 9; recreational reading; number of books available at home; child's expectation of final educational attainment; home region; family income level; family social class; family composition; migrant family; primary caregivers educational level; parents' expectation of final educational attainment for child; parental emotional responsiveness to child; parental engagement with school.

Within the ordinal regression analysis, a hierarchical modelling approach was adopted to correct for intra-class correlation at the post-primary school, primary school and primary classroom levels. As students in the same school or class already have some factors in common, this approach allowed us to account for these existing groupings and better estimate the relationship between the variables of interest in this study. The R ordinal package was used for these analyses (Christensen, 2019; R Core Team, 2020). Where a number of independent variables are included in a regression model, the risk of incorrectly identifying an independent variable as being significantly related to the dependent variable increases (such instances can be termed 'false discoveries'). As there were a relatively large number of independent variables included here, the p-values were adjusted using the method of Benjamini & Hochberg (1995) which controls the expected proportion of false discoveries at 5%. Separate analyses were conducted for the HE and LE cohorts with perceived difficulty and interest in Irish as two separate dependent variables.

3. Results

Tables 2a and 2b list the independent variables significantly related to perceived difficulty and interest for Irish. The adjusted p-values for each variable were all less than 0.05 unless otherwise indicated, indicating strong evidence of a relationship. All independent variables were categorical and odds ratios (OR) were calculated between categories for a more favourable attitude to Irish (i.e. less difficult/more interesting). The odds ratio is a relative measure for the likelihood a student in one category reported a more favourable attitude to the subject compared to a student in a second category. As an aid to the effective summary of these results the following relative labelling was used: OR >2 (i.e. the odds in one category is more than twice that of a comparison category) as ‘strong’; 1.5 < OR < 2 as ‘moderate’; OR < 1.5 ‘modest’. Independent variables not appearing in the table were not statistically significant across any of the four regression models fitted. Overall, the findings suggest a broader range of variables associated with motivation for Irish in the HE cohort than the LE cohort. The findings in relation to school demographic characteristics are modest and as such are not discussed in greater depth here.

Table 2a

Independent variables and their strength of relationship with Perceived Difficulty in Irish

Ordinal Logistic Regression: Statistically significant independent variables		
	Students with higher school engagement	Students with lower school engagement
Strong relationship with perceived difficulty of Irish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schooling through Irish • Negative interactions with teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schooling through Irish • Negative interactions with teachers
Moderate relationship with perceived difficulty of Irish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes to Irish aged 9 • Irish level studied • Traditional teaching style • Literacy attainment at aged 9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes to Irish aged 9 • Positive interactions with teachers

Modest relationship with perceived difficulty of Irish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School and gender • Fee-paying school • 1st or 2nd year • Child-centred teaching style • Time doing homework • Parents helping with homework • Child’s educational expectation • Parents educational expectation • Household composition • Migrant household 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School & gender • DEIS status* • Literacy attainment at aged 9
*Borderline significant with adjusted p-value between 0.05 and 0.1.		

Table 2b

Independent variables and their strength of relationship with Interest in Irish

Ordinal Logistic Regression: Statistically significant independent variables		
	Students with higher school engagement	Students with lower school engagement
Moderate relationship with perceived difficulty of Irish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schooling through Irish • Attitudes to Irish aged 9 • Child-centred teaching style • Positive interactions with teachers • Negative interactions with teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schooling through Irish • Attitudes to Irish aged 9 • Positive interactions with teachers • Parental responsiveness
Modest relationship with perceived difficulty of Irish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish level studied • Fee-paying school • Parental responsiveness • Migrant household 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreational reading

3.1 Irish in school

Across both cohorts and items, the relationship with attitude to Irish age 9 remains very consistent. The most significant factor is the language of schooling. The strongest effect was

observed on the difficulty item comparing primary education through Irish to education through English (OR for the HE cohort 16.4; OR for the LE cohort 20.9). Those with primary education through Irish in EM post-primary schools found the subject less difficult than those with primary education through Irish in IM post-primary schools (OR for the LE cohort 2.3; OR for the LE cohort 2.2). For the difficulty item, students with primary education through Irish in either IM or an EM post-primary education found Irish less difficult compared to those fully educated through English or newly entering an IM post-primary school. The same pattern was repeated for the interesting item, but with reduced effect sizes (e.g. comparing primary education through Irish with education through English: OR for the HE cohort 1.5; OR for the LE cohort 1.9).

3.2 Classroom environment and Student Experience

Two derived independent variables were created to measure the use of more autonomy supporting, child-centred versus more didactic, teacher-led teaching styles. The child-centred style was measured by scoring the frequency of use of group work, audio-visual equipment, computer based learning, project work and opportunities for expression of student opinion. The teacher-led style was scored on the frequency of use of copying notes from the board, teacher reading from a text book, teacher led explanations and teacher doing most talking in the class. These factors were significant for the HE cohort only. Among that cohort, more frequent use of child-centred teaching methods was related to finding Irish less difficult and more interesting (OR 'difficulty' most frequent use over least use 1.5; 'interesting' most frequent use over least use 1.5). For the HE cohort, increased frequency of using a teacher-led style was related to finding Irish more difficult (OR most frequent use over least use 1.3. Note that in this case the OR reported is for finding Irish more difficult).

As regards teacher-student interactions, we followed Smyth (2016) in scoring positive and negative interactions using six items from the GUI data. More positive interactions were

related to finding Irish less difficult and more interesting for the LE cohort (OR most over least positive category: difficulty 1.6; interesting 1.6). For the HE cohort the relationship was found for finding Irish more interesting but not for difficulty (OR highest over lowest category: 1.4). For both the HE and LE cohorts, more negative interactions were associated with finding Irish more difficult (OR most over least negative category: HE cohort 2.1; LE cohort 2.3. Note: the ORs reported here are for finding Irish more difficult). A significant relationship was found between negative interactions and finding Irish less interesting but only among the HE cohort (OR most over least negative category: 1.8; NB: here the ORs reported are for finding Irish less interesting). Less time spent doing homework and less help from parents with homework were both related to finding Irish less difficult for the HE cohort (OR least over most: time spent on homework 1.4; parent helping with homework 1.3).

3.3 Child/family characteristics

A higher level of literacy attainment at age 9 is related to finding Irish less difficult for both the HE and LE cohorts (OR highest over lowest literacy attainment: HE cohort 1.7; LE cohort 1.5). The same relationship is not found for interest in Irish. However, recreational reading is related to an increased interest in Irish for the LE cohort (OR highest over lowest categories for recreational reading 1.4). Both child and parent educational expectations were related to perceived difficulty for the HE cohort with higher expectations in both cases being related to finding Irish less difficult (OR child expectations degree or higher over post-primary school 1.3; parents expectations postgraduate over degree 1.3). Household composition compared one to two parent households. This was related to perceived difficulty for the HE cohort with children from two parent households reporting Irish as less difficult (OR two over one parent 1.5). Migrant households were categorised as: non-migrant; migrant English speaking at home; migrant non-English speaking at home. This variable was related to both perceived difficulty and interest in Irish but only for the HE cohort. In both cases it

was children from non-migrant households that were better disposed towards the subject compared to children from migrant English-speaking households (OR non-migrant over English speaking migrant: Difficulty 1.5; Interesting 1.4). Comparisons with non-English speaking migrant children were not statistically significant.

Parental responsiveness for the primary caregiver measured the warmth of the emotional climate of the child-parent relationship (Thornton et al., 2016). Increased emotional responsiveness was related to an increased interest in Irish for both cohorts (OR highest over lowest responsiveness categories: HE cohort 1.4; LE cohort 1.4).

4. Discussion

The SEVT provides the framework for this discussion. We focus particularly on the subjective task values of attainment value, utility value, cost and interest-enjoyment value. The latter two dimensions are explored directly in the present study (through perceived difficulty and interest) while the former are discussed for context. The analysis highlights differential influences on students' motivation, dependent on their overall engagement with schooling.

4.1 The Language of Schooling

The notable consistency in pupils' attitudes toward Irish from primary to post-primary education speaks to the significance of early experience. Our findings suggest that attending IM primary education insulates learners against general trends towards perceiving Irish as more difficult and less interesting at post-primary. Compared to their EM peers, exposure to Irish as the medium of instruction prepares IM primary students well to deal with post-primary curriculum demands. The finding that pupils in EM post-primary schools who attended an IM primary school perceive Irish as less difficult than their IM post-primary peers raises questions about possible social comparison processes. Taking Marsh and colleagues Big-Fish-Little-Pond effects and subsequent work on comparative processes

(Marsh, 1986; Möller & Marsh, 2013), the IM primary students who find themselves in the minority in EM post-primary schools may perceive themselves to be more competent in the Irish classroom compared to their EM primary peers while their IM primary peers who progressed to IM post-primary may not perceive this comparative advantage in a population who mostly attended IM primary. This discrepancy highlights the critical role of expectations of success and academic self-concept in student engagement and achievement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

These findings are particularly relevant to the ongoing debate about differentiated curricula for Irish in IM and EM schools (Mac Gearailt et al., 2023). They raise questions about the supply of IM schools, which are often oversubscribed. Research indicates that while 23% of the public would choose IM primary education if available (Darmody & Daly, 2015), only 8.1% currently attend, with just 3.6% attending IM post-primary education (Murray et al., 2023). Addressing the demand for more IM schools is essential, but teacher supply remains a challenge.

To bridge the gap between IM and EM education in the interim, extending current Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) pilots could enhance language competence and motivation to learn Irish. Opportunities to engage with Irish in a meaningful context could increase its perceived utility value. Professional development for teachers in CLIL methodologies is crucial, focusing on both linguistic proficiency and pedagogical practices. Ó Ceallaigh et al. (2017) and Ní Dhiorbháin (2020) provide frameworks for such development, which could also be adapted for initial teacher education programs.

The role of immersion experiences in shaping student identity and the perceived attainment value of Irish is significant. Within the HE cohort, students from migrant non-English-speaking households displayed more positive attitudes toward Irish than those from

English-speaking migrant backgrounds. For these students, Irish may represent a facet of national or multilingual identity, enhancing its attainment value. Murray et al. (2023) argue that the study of Irish can foster intercultural understanding depending on how its value is framed. In today's multilingual classrooms, promoting a broader interpretation of the Irish language—viewing it as integral to a diverse identity rather than solely a national language—can enhance motivation and social cohesion. This aligns with the NCCA's plans to introduce modern foreign languages into the Primary Language Curriculum, aimed at fostering cultural appreciation and social unity (NCCA, 2024).

4.2 Classroom Environment and Relationships

Our study emphasises the social and pedagogical dimensions of the classroom in shaping students' perspectives on Irish, particularly among both higher and lower engagement groups. Devitt et al. (2018) identified significant teacher effects on engagement with Irish, and our findings reinforce this. Student-centered teaching styles and positive interactions with teachers correlate with more favourable perceptions of Irish as less difficult and more interesting. Negative teacher interactions are significantly related to perceptions of difficulty; students reporting more negative experiences are twice as likely to find Irish challenging, regardless of other factors. This is in line with previous research demonstrating the importance of student-teacher relationships for engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2017). This relationship is likely to be particularly important in Irish language contexts where teachers often serve as primary linguistic models, especially outside the Gaeltacht (Nig Uidhir & Ó Ceallaigh, 2023).

Teacher-student relationships are closely linked to engagement (Roorda et al, 2017). This is critical to the LE group in particular wherein only positive and negative interactions contribute to perceived difficulty and interest; teaching styles do not. Furthermore parental emotional responsiveness is significantly related to perceived difficulty and interest for the

LE group, highlighting the importance of the broader social environment. Taken together, these findings point to the importance of positive relationships between students and significant adults, both parents and teachers, mirroring previous research (Fernández-Zabala et al 2016). Existing research in the Irish context (Harris et al., 2006) echoes international research on the role of parents in supporting motivation (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009).

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of considering overall school engagement when motivating students to learn Irish. An immersive primary schooling environment fosters higher interest and enjoyment, while reducing the perceived difficulty of learning Irish. The potential of smaller-scale immersive experiences, such CLIL in English-medium schools, warrants further exploration. Beyond immersion, a child-centred and autonomy-supportive classroom environment, combined with positive student-teacher relationships, plays a key role in reducing difficulty and boosting interest in Irish.

Addressing low motivation for Irish requires more than just enhancing interest or reducing perceived difficulty; increasing the language's utility value is recommended. Within education, this might involve increasing the points for assessments in Irish, as done with higher-level maths. Broader efforts could focus on raising awareness of the employment, social, and cultural benefits of learning Irish. Low motivation linked to low perceived utility is common in minority language contexts. Attempts to revitalise minority languages solely through symbolic or identity-based approaches can be counter-productive, as they may reinforce a narrow view of the language's role (Murray et al, 2023). The study offers insights for language and education policymakers, particularly in dual language regions where the majority language holds significant utility.

Tá na húdair buíoch den mhaoiniú a chuir An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta ar fáil don taighde seo.

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