

Hearing Children's Perceptions and Attitudes towards Irish Sign Language (ISL) and the Deaf
Community

Professional Master of Education

2018-2020

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Word Count: 10,896

Submitted to Marino Institute of Education on the 11th of May 2020

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Declaration

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Date: 11/05/2020

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped me with the work involved in this dissertation. Firstly, this study would not have been possible without the cooperation, help and support of the school and the children who participated.

I wish to express my genuine appreciation to my supervisor, Miriam Colum. Her professional guidance and enthusiasm for the research made the completion of this dissertation possible. She inspired and motivated me to do the best I could. I would also like to thank all the lecturers and staff from Marino Institute of Education for the invaluable knowledge they imparted to me over the duration of this course.

I would like to thank my cohort in the Professional Master of Education (PME) for their advice, encouragement, and above all, friendship. They have made the last two years a truly enjoyable experience.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, family and close friends for their constant support, encouragement, guidance, and patience throughout the duration of not only this dissertation but over the last two years in general. Without it, the journey would have undoubtedly been a lot more challenging!

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract.....	vi
List of Acronyms	vii
List of figures.....	viii
List of tables.....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Research aim and rationale.....	1
Terminology.....	2
Historical background	2
Research motivation and positionality.....	3
Chapter overview	3
Chapter 2:Literature Review.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	5
The Deaf community.....	6
Official languages in Ireland.....	7
Languages and the Curriculum.....	8
Irish Sign Language.....	9
Key word signing.....	11
Language recognition.	12
Recognition of Irish Sign Language.	12
Educational supports for d/Deaf children.	13
Perceptions and attitudes towards languages.....	14
Conclusion	16
Chapter 3: Research Methodology.....	18
Ethics.....	18
Data types	19
Quantitative.....	19
Qualitative.	20
Mixed methods.	20

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Research instrument	20
Questionnaire design.	20
Advantages and disadvantages.	22
Validity and reliability	22
Piloting	23
Sample	23
Data analysis	24
Conclusion	26
Chapter 4: Presentation of data	27
Children's perception of d/Deaf people's use of sign language (Q1)	27
Children's perception of the legitimacy of sign language (Q2)	27
Settings in which respondents had encountered sign language being used (Q3)	28
Children's perception of sign language as its own natural language (Q4)	29
Children's descriptions of sign language (Q5)	30
Children's attitudes towards learning sign language (Q6)	30
Children's attitudes towards the difficulty of learning sign language (Q7)	31
Children's attitudes towards learning sign language in school (Q8)	32
Teaching of other languages in school (Q9)	33
Conclusion	34
Chapter 5: Analysis and discussion	35
Perceptions of sign language and the Deaf community	35
Language recognition.	35
Use of sign language	37
Attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community	39
Language and motivation	39
Key word signing	40
Learning ISL in school.	41
Attitudes towards languages.	42
Limitations	43
Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations	45
Reflection	47

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

References	48
Appendices	55
Appendix A: Letters of consent	55
Appendix A1: Letter to the principal.....	55
Appendix A2: Letter to the Parent/Guardian.....	56
Appendix A3: Participant Statement of Consent.....	57
Appendix B: Questionnaire.....	57

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Abstract

Irish Sign Language (ISL) was recognised as an official language of Ireland in 2017. The Deaf community spent over 30 years campaigning for this recognition. Irish and English are the two other national languages of Ireland, which are taught in the new primary language curriculum (PLC) that was introduced to all primary schools in 2019. ISL is referred to in the new PLC, as it aims to promote language awareness. This study investigates the perceptions and attitudes of hearing children towards ISL and the Deaf community.

Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered through the distribution of anonymous questionnaires. The sample group comprised 32 pupils from 3rd to 6th classes in a mainstream primary school in Dublin, Ireland. The children had some prior knowledge of basic ISL and Deaf culture.

The findings reflected an overall positive perception of, and attitude towards both ISL and the Deaf community. The majority of children perceived ISL as a legitimate language, and recognised that it was a language used by the Deaf community. Based on these findings, along with those from previous studies it is postulated that the concurrent learning of Deaf culture alongside ISL contributes to more positive perceptions and attitudes. These findings have implications for teachers and policy makers for any possible future efforts to include ISL in the primary school curriculum. For example, by incorporating an element of Deaf Studies into the primary teacher education curriculum to raise awareness in schools of ISL and the Irish Deaf community.

List of Acronyms

ASL: American Sign Language

BSL: British Sign Language

CDS: Centre for Deaf Studies

D/HH: Deaf or Hard of Hearing

DES: Department of Education and Skills

DS: Down syndrome

HFSDC: Holy Family School for Deaf Children

IDS: Irish Deaf Society

ISL: Irish Sign Language

KWS: Key Word Signing

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

PLC: Primary Language Curriculum

PME: Professional Master of Education

SEN: Special Educational Needs

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

List of figures

Figure 1: Children's perception of d/Deaf people's use of sign language.....	27
Figure 2: Children's perception of the legitimacy of sign language.....	28
Figure 3: Children's perception of sign language as its own natural language.	29
Figure 4: Children's attitudes towards learning sign language.....	31
Figure 5: Children's attitudes towards the difficulty of learning sign language.....	31
Figure 6: Children's attitudes towards learning sign language in school.	32
Figure 7: Children who learned languages other than English/Irish in school.	33

List of tables

Table 1: Codes used in content analysis of qualitative data.	25
Table 2: Settings in which children had encountered sign language being used.....	29
Table 3: Children's descriptions of sign language.....	30
Table 4: Why the children want to learn sign language.....	33
Table 5: Languages (other than English/Irish) taught in school.	34

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research aim and rationale

The aim of this research is to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of hearing children in a primary school in Dublin towards Irish Sign Language (ISL) and the Deaf community. After many years of campaigning led by the Deaf community, ISL has recently been granted Governmental recognition as an official language in Ireland (ISL Act, 2017), along with Irish, English (Delaney, 2016) and Cant, which is acknowledged under the recognition of Traveller ethnicity (Oireachtas, 2017). ISL has gained significant status in being made an official language. The ISL Act states that public bodies should prepare and implement action plans on ISL, for example in legal proceedings, broadcasting principles and deaf education (ISL Act, 2017).

The status of a language can have an impact on language policy in education. This is evident in the new primary language curriculum (PLC) which was implemented in primary schools in 2019 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2019). Although the main focus of the PLC is the teaching of Irish and English, it also recognises that the awareness of other languages can contribute to children's cultural knowledge of languages and help them to make cross-lingual connections between languages, enabling them to understand and compare how languages work (ibid.). In this description, the PLC includes raising awareness of different methods of language communication, specifically referring to ISL, as "a recognised language of Ireland (that) has its own unique linguistic structure, rules and features" (NCCA, 2019, p.9). This research will look at the children's perceptions and attitudes in terms of this aspect of the PLC.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Terminology

Throughout this paper, capital ‘D’ and ‘H’ will be used for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH), who regard deafness as part of their cultural identity. The term ‘d/Deaf’ will be used by the researcher when discussing both Deaf people who are a part of the cultural Deaf community (capital D) and deaf people who associate their deafness with the medical model (small d), seeing deafness as an impairment (Lane, 2002). By comparison, the Irish Census collects data on the number of deaf/hearing impaired people using the terms ‘deaf’ and ‘hearing impaired’, regardless of their cultural stance on deafness and hearing loss. In this way, the Census only accounts for deafness in terms of the medical model.

Historical background

Historically, societal attitudes towards d/Deaf people have been recorded, and how they and their language have been rejected or accepted in society. In the 1500s hearing people in Europe began to realise the academic capabilities of the d/Deaf. Deaf education began as individual tutoring and later developed from small groups into the establishment of schools for the d/Deaf (Leigh, Harris and Andrews, 2018). Most of these schools used sign language, until 1880 when an International Congress on the Education of the Deaf was held in Milan. The majority of attendants at this congress were hearing, and it was decided that a spoken language approach (oralism) should be taken in schools for the d/Deaf (Leigh et al., 2018). Spoken language was regarded as superior to signed language and it was thought at the time that speech would benefit the d/Deaf community more (ibid.). Oralism was introduced in Ireland in the late 1940s and ISL was banned in all d/Deaf schools (O’Connell and Deegan, 2014). The negative perception of ISL and the focus on speech, rather than academics, resulted in large deficits in

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

reading and writing abilities among d/Deaf school leavers. The bilingual-education model, took over from the failed oralism approach (ibid.). The bilingual-education model teaches both natural sign language and the literacy of the native spoken language of the country (Humphries, 2013). This is the current approach used in schools for the d/Deaf in Ireland today, using ISL and English literacy (Holy Family School for Deaf Children [HFSDC], 2019).

Research motivation and positionality

In 2017/2018, the researcher worked as a special needs assistant for a deaf junior infant pupil in a mainstream primary school. The pupil did not use ISL. As the researcher has a Bachelor's degree in Deaf Studies, it was suggested by the school that the children from 1st - 6th class could learn about the Deaf community and ISL. The parents of the children expressed interest in learning ISL as well. The enthusiasm from this school community to learn ISL is what led the researcher to investigate the children's perceptions and attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community. The researcher has recently completed a PME (2018-2020) and taught in the previously mentioned school for the final placement block of the course. The researcher is aware that the connection with the pupils in the school and the background in Deaf studies has the potential to give the research a biased view. This has been acknowledged in the limitations of the study, and methods have been employed throughout the research process to try and reduce this.

Chapter overview

The purpose of this section is to present an overview of what is to be expected in each chapter within this work. There are six chapters within this paper, all of which discuss different aspects of studying the perceptions and attitudes towards ISL and the d/Deaf community.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

This chapter introduced readers to the topic of ISL and the Deaf community. It states the aims and rationale of this paper and presents background information to contextualise the study.

Chapter 2 is a literature review. This chapter contains all relevant literature, readings and studies associated with the perceptions and attitudes towards signed languages and Deaf communities.

Chapter 3 is the research methods. In this chapter, questionnaire-based research methodologies are reviewed. Advantages and disadvantages of different methods are described, pointing to the methodological approach chosen in this study.

Chapter 4 is the results section. In this chapter the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study are presented graphically.

Chapter 5 is the analysis and discussion. In this chapter, the results are critically analysed and discussed in the context of previous studies.

Chapter 6 contains the conclusions of the study. Conclusions are drawn with careful consideration of both the scope, and the limitations of the current study. Furthermore, recommendations for raising awareness of ISL and the Deaf community in Irish education are offered.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will look at some of the most relevant literature surrounding the perceptions of sign language and attitudes towards languages. The first section looks at Deaf communities and how sign languages are an integral part of their culture. The second section outlines the status of the various official languages of Ireland. The third section focuses on ISL as a language, and what language recognition means for ISL. The fourth and final section addresses the perceptions and attitudes towards languages and how they can affect language policy.

Theoretical Framework

This study of literature is framed by Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970). Freire investigates how people who have been marginalised and dehumanised, have been kept in a 'culture of silence' by their oppressors. Freire's theory states that the right kind of education can develop a new sense of awareness in people that will enable them to free themselves from oppression. As Freire puts it "each individual wins back the right to say his or her own word, to name the world" (Freire, 1996, p.69).

In Freire's theory, education plays an important role on both sides, the oppressors and the oppressed. Freire states that the oppressors use education to adapt the individual to "better fit the world", in the way they want the world to be (Freire, 1996). However, Freire also encourages the oppressed to 'liberate themselves' through education. Using this theoretical framework, we can think of the majority languages as the 'oppressors', who are oppressing ISL through language policy status and education. Implementation of ISL in language policy, could mean liberation of ISL from its oppressed state.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

The Deaf community

Deaf communities are similar to other communities, in that they have a diversity of cultures and groups within their community. There is ethnic and racial diversity among deaf communities as well as diversity in the range of hearing levels, from minor hearing loss to complete deafness (Leigh, Andrews and Harris, 2018). Not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing use sign language. Being culturally Deaf in a Deaf community means that you are proud to be Deaf and want to interact with other Deaf people using their cultural language, sign language (Leigh et al., 2018). As already acknowledged the interchangeability between capital and lower 'd' signals the disparity between viewing deafness as a culture and deafness as an impairment. We can liken the use of the capital 'D' for Deaf to cultural emancipation. This echoes Freire who describes culture as being the opposite to nature. Humans cannot change the ways of nature, but they can change their cultural context, which gives them an opportunity to transform the situation they are in (Irwin, 2012). The Deaf community use their cultural identity to emancipate themselves from the medical model of deafness.

The figures from the 2016 census stated that a total of 103,676 people (2.2%) were deaf or had a serious hearing impairment. It also indicated that there were 4,228 ISL users in Ireland. This figure is contested by the Deaf community, as it is a very low number in comparison to other countries of similar population size (Irish Deaf Society [IDS], 2019). The IDS state that the question regarding ISL was possibly not clearly phrased and that it was answered incorrectly. They estimate that there are roughly 5,000 Deaf people in Ireland who use ISL as their first and/or preferred language and a further 40,000 hearing people who have some level of ISL, for example family, co-workers and friends (IDS, 2019).

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

The Deaf community in Ireland regard themselves as a cultural community rather than a group of people with a disability (Leeson and Saeed, 2012). Matthews (1996) defines community as a group of people who share particular features and therefore have a sense of belonging to a certain group and come together to form a community. The Irish Deaf community is a very close-knit community, with the largest Deaf community being located in Dublin where many Deaf events are organized (ibid.). Someone who is part of the Deaf community in Ireland will have hearing loss from an early age, use ISL as their main form of communication, and regularly attend social events with other Deaf people (Matthews, 1996). People of the Deaf community have a positive attitude towards sign language and are proud of their language (ibid.).

Napier (2002) argues that hearing people can also be a part of the Deaf community, for example interpreters, family members and researchers who have become a part of the Deaf community through their involvement linguistically, politically and socially. The Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) was established in Trinity College Dublin in 2001 (CDS, n.d.). The aim of the CDS is to increase the number of ISL/English interpreters in Ireland, to encourage the use of ISL and to raise awareness of Deaf culture, whilst promoting research and education in the area of Deaf Studies (ibid.). Lucas (2001) describes sign language as a path to integration into the hearing community, stating that if interpreters are provided, deaf people can access services and make their opinions heard within the majority society.

Official languages in Ireland

ISL is one of the four languages that is officially recognised by the Irish State. The other official languages are; Irish, the first official language of the State; English, the language that is predominantly used in Ireland; and Cant, the language traditionally used by the Traveller

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

community. Irish was made the first official language after a revised constitution in 1937, which made English the second official language in Ireland (Delaney, 2016). English has been widely used in Ireland since the British colonisation of Ireland in the eighteenth century (Delaney, 2016). Cant, also referred to as Gammon, is an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Irish Traveller community, and has been around for centuries (Reider, 2019). Traveller Ethnicity was officially recognised by the State in 2017 (Oireachtas, 2017).

Both English and Irish are used in the Irish Parliament, An Oireachtas. Although most of the speeches are given in English, members of An Oireachtas can choose to speak in either language, and interpretation will be provided (Oireachtas, n.d.). Cant was only used once in the Oireachtas, in a speech made by the Taoiseach for the recognition of Traveller Ethnicity (Oireachtas, 2017). In 2019, the Oireachtas was made accessible to the Deaf community through the provision of ISL interpreters (Oireachtas, 2019). Recognising native languages in Parliament is important in terms of inclusivity. To quote a member of the Oireachtas, “Parliament must be representative of wider society” (Ó Fearghail, 2017).

Languages and the Curriculum.

Languages included in the national curriculum result in more people learning them, therefore giving them a higher status reference. This shows the impact that language policy and the national curriculum can have on language learning and on the perception of languages. English and Irish are the only two languages that are mandatory in Irish schools. The new PLC was developed by the NCCA in collaboration with teachers, and reflects their ideas for improvements of the dated 1999 Language curriculum (NCCA, 2019). From these suggestions and the latest research, the new language curriculum has made improvements with regards to; the

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

development of language learning, integrating Irish and English to support language learning across both subjects; providing support materials for teachers; being more inclusive by accommodating for different levels of learning; and providing more supports for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Although d/Deaf children are categorised as SEN, there is no mention in the PLC for catering to the specific language needs of ISL users such as interpreter provision and teacher training. Furthermore, information for parents is available on the 2019 Primary Language Curriculum in nine languages, none of which are ISL (NCCA, 2019). Although the PLC may not be very accessible for the Deaf community, it does aim to promote the use of other languages and specifically refers to ISL in the importance of raising language awareness in schools (NCCA, 2019).

This can be framed in Freire's (2005) concept of 'adaptation and integration', where 'adaptation' is described as the unwillingness or the inability to intervene in a situation where change is needed. Taking a Freire perspective, we can assume that the new PLC has been adapted to include ISL but does nothing to integrate it. This curriculum has been implemented from junior infants to sixth class in English-medium schools, Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools and special schools (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2019).

Irish Sign Language

Language is defined by Battison (1978) as a communication system that is governed by rules. Sign language has its own set of rules that make it unique to spoken languages. It is a language that is visually received and produced manually, as opposed to spoken languages which are received auditorily and produced orally (ibid.). Fingerspelling (using different handshapes to represent letters) is used in sign language to spell words from a spoken language which have no

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

equivalence in sign language. It is often used to spell out places or names (Leeson and Saeed, 2012). The structure of sign language also differs to the structures of a spoken language (Leeson and Saeed, 2012). Word order in signed languages is complex due to the multifaceted way in which signed languages are produced. Sign language users express information on the body, in the 'signing space' which involves; using facial expressions and head movements (non-manual features); and the hands (manual features) (ibid.). The following example shows the difference in structure and word order between ISL and English. The 'n' symbolizes the negation in the ISL sentence, through the action of a headshake from side to side and a frown of the mouth;

_____n

ISL: 'GIRL COME SCHOOL'

English: 'The girl did not come to school'

It has been a common misconception that sign language is a universal language, that sign language is the same in every country. There are many different signed languages across the world, for example Australian Sign Language, German Sign Language, American Sign Language, British Sign Language, etc. (Baynton, 2002). Signed languages are natural languages, meaning they developed independently through culture and history, unlike artificial languages such as Esperanto, signed English systems and computer languages (Baynton, 2002). International Sign Language began with a modern increase in international contacts and international organisations. In most situations it was used for very limited times and purposes, for example European meetings. Signers from different nationalities would devise ways of communicating through briefly observing the other sign languages and then communicate on an ad hoc basis (Emmorey and Reilly, 1995). In the 1970s an attempt was made to standardise and

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

expand the lexicon of International Sign Language. This movement coincided with the movement to create the spoken international language, Esperanto, and because of this International Sign Language was re-labelled as ‘Gestuno’ (Emmorey and Reilly, 1995). This attempt was not hugely successful as Deaf people argued that the signs were not iconic or tangible enough and preferred to revert to their original style of spontaneous international sign. It has since developed and in 2003, International Sign Language was recognised as an official language, and is no longer called Gestuno (Moody, 2008).

Key word signing.

Key Word Signing (KWS) is another kind of manual language that is formed through the adoption and adaptation of sign language. In the UK, Makaton is the KWS system that is based on British Sign Language and Lámh is the Irish KWS, based on ISL signs (Meuris, Maes, DeMeyer and Zinka, 2014). KWS is a type of augmentative and alternative communication used with children presenting with SEN that have language, communication and speech difficulties (Dolly and Noble, 2018). In Lámh, signs are used to accompany key words in speech to help with language development and to strengthen understanding and communication (Lámh, n.d.). Lámh only has five hundred signs and does not use complex hand signs of fingerspelling (Lámh, n.d.).

A study by Bowles and Frizelle (2016) looked at the attitudes of young children towards the use of Lámh with children with Down syndrome (DS) in a mainstream school. The results found that the children, although they struggled to remember handshapes at times, had an overall positive attitude towards signing, finding it enjoyable to learn and recognised the value it had in terms of communication with children in their class who used Lámh. Following these findings, it

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

was suggested that in order to enhance communication, all the children in the school should learn Lámh. It must be noted that the research focused on a small sample of two schools, both of which had a child with DS in attendance. Four children from each school participated in the study, one of which was the best friend of the child with DS and three others who were randomly selected. The small sample and potential bias (best friend as a participant) are limitations of this study. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that there was a positive response to using Lámh, thus suggesting the children's perceptions of a signed language to be positive.

Language recognition.

ISL was recognised as an official language in Ireland in December 2017, after 30 years of campaigning led by the Deaf community (IDS, 2019). The Act contains eleven clauses that address the provision for ISL recognition, the use of ISL in legal proceedings, the provision of ISL interpretation by public organisations and the provision for related matters (ISL Act, 2017). This was a positive step forward to embed ISL in Irish society. If we view ISL recognition through the theoretical lens of Freire, the Deaf community have achieved what Freire terms as ultimate 'human completion'. Through this lens the Deaf community (the oppressed) reject the medical model (image of the deaf by the oppressors) and achieve 'freedom' (through the recognition of their language). To elucidate this concept, references are made to sections of the ISL Act that assist, or could do more to assist, in raising the awareness of ISL through education.

Recognition of Irish Sign Language.

Section 3.1 of the ISL Act describes the responsibility of the State to provide services for the right to use ISL as a native language;

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

“The State recognises the right of Irish Sign Language users to use Irish Sign Language as their native language and the corresponding duty on all public bodies to provide Irish Sign Language users with free interpretation when availing of or seeking to access statutory entitlements and services.” (ISL Act, 2017).

Initially the IDS campaigned for a clause that would recognise ISL as a language in its own right, and the cultural aspects of the language to be recognised, rather than just a provision for access to ISL interpreters (Conama, 2019). However, as this clause was not accepted, the IDS felt they should accept the amended clause, as another opportunity for recognition may not arise (Conama, 2019). This recognition, although not complete, is significant for the Deaf community because it means the State will have to make more provisions for ISL and ISL users. ISL has experienced repression and misrepresentations in years gone by (Matthews, 1996) and although there is now a more positive feeling towards ISL, it still faces barriers, for example from some public officials, who see demands from ISL users as irrational, thinking that the provision of English text will suffice, when video translation to ISL is desired (Conama, 2019). Although the research by Matthews (1996) is dated, there has been no recent research that contradicts it or that reinforces it. The official status of ISL will hopefully raise more awareness about the language and the community it represents in Ireland.

Educational supports for d/Deaf children.

Section 5 of the ISL Act defines educational supports for d/Deaf children. It calls for the support of SNAs for d/Deaf children in schools and well as teacher education training courses for

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

the provision of teachers qualified specifically to teach in schools for d/Deaf children (ibid.). The ISL Act (2017) does not provide for the teaching of ISL to members of the hearing community, unless they are closely associated with a d/Deaf child, for example parents or carers. In Ireland, ISL is available through the leaving certificate applied programme, but is not a language option for the junior or leaving certificate (State Examinations Committee, 2019).

In primary schools children are taught English and Irish (NCCA, 2019) but not ISL unless they are in a school for d/Deaf children (HFSDC, 2019). As mentioned, Irish and English are official languages of the State. Now that ISL has also been officially recognised, it raises the question of ISL being included in some part of our national education curriculum. For this to be a potential it is important to find out students' attitudes to learning ISL. A study by MacIntyre and Charos (1996) shows that attitudes towards second language learning, has an impact on the motivation to learn the target language.

Perceptions and attitudes towards languages

As part of a study by Feeney (2015) on the perceived status of the Irish Deaf community and ISL, Feeney compares her own research findings with that of similar research by Kyle and Allsop (1997) and Leeson and Sheikh (2008). Kyle and Allsop's (1997) study found that 50% of Irish participants perceived ISL to be lesser in status than all spoken languages. The data from the study by Leeson and Sheikh (2008) includes several countries, Ireland being among them. The findings have a similarly negative view towards ISL (ibid.). The studies from Leeson and Sheikh (2008) also revealed that there was a more positive perception of signed languages in countries where sign language was recognised as an official language. Although the findings on the perception of ISL from 1997 and 2008 were for the most part negative, Feeney's findings

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

from 2015 showed significant improvements regarding the awareness of ISL, with most of the participants perceiving it as equal to all other spoken languages (Feeney, 2015). The current study seeks to examine if any parities can be drawn between hearing children's perceptions of ISL and the Deaf community and the findings from Feeney's (2015) study.

An attitude is described by Eagly and Chaiken (2007, p.582) as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavor”. Attitudes determine people's thinking towards things, and these attitudes can have positive or negative implications (Lee and Pott, 2018). Therefore, as the hearing community are the majority, we can assume that their attitudes can impact positively or negatively on the language used by the Deaf community. Baker (2011) states that cultural awareness is important when it comes to the teaching of a language, as culture and language strongly influence each other. Baker (2011) also contends that it is important for second language learners to be aware of their own cultural communicative behaviours as well as that of other languages, as this provides the information needed for the use and teaching of the language. This indicates that the attitudes towards sign languages and the perceptions of the language and deaf culture are important when it comes to language policy and planning.

Looking at language attitudes in terms of sociolinguistics can help in evaluating language policies, particularly regarding measures to effect changes in attitudes towards languages (Sihua, 2015). Particularly, sociolinguistics in the area of education in a country that has multiple languages and a prominent linguistic hierarchy (ibid.). In Irelands linguistic hierarchy, ISL is a minority language. Baker (1992) discusses how surveys of attitudes can be used as an indicator on the preferences, desires, thoughts, and beliefs of a community. They also investigate the changes in the attitudes of the community, which can lead to the chance of policy change. In

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

relation to minority languages, Baker (1992) compares attitude surveys to Censuses, as they show a measurement of the status of the language. Language attitudes are important because they indicate the status, value and importance that the language has in a society. The information gathered from attitude surveys is important in attempting to democratically represent the views of the people (Baker, 1992). Anecdotal media evidence and academic surveys of language attitudes often demonstrate the same perceptions and value judgments towards a language (Lucas, 2001).

Academic studies often broaden the definition of language attitudes to include language users, as they are the ones who are impacted by the attitudes towards their language (ibid.). Krausneker (2015) highlights the most common issues of the perceptions of signed languages, for example people from the hearing community questioning whether sign language is a real language, due to misunderstandings and misconceptions. For years, sign language was not regarded as a ‘real language’, however, the attitude towards signed languages has changed dramatically due to sign linguistics research and Deaf studies (Napier and Leeson, 2016). This research aims to explicate if the children’s attitudes towards ISL are positive or negative.

Conclusion

Although it has come a long way, there is work to be done and policies to be implemented before the status of ISL is fully recognised. In comparison to the status and policy implementation of Irish and English, ISL is far behind. In terms of integration, the ISL Act (2017) seems to focus on the integration of the Deaf community into the hearing community, for example, the training of interpreters, and the training of teachers to teach in the d/Deaf school. If efforts were being made to integrate the hearing community into the d/Deaf community, the ISL

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Act (2017) might have included ISL in the national education curriculum, or the establishment of ISL courses for teachers in mainstream schools to learn ISL as well. The studies on the perceptions and attitudes towards languages and language users, although some are dated, reveal that these can influence language policy and planning. This research will aim to uncover the perceptions and attitudes of primary school hearing children towards ISL and the Deaf community.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In this section, the research methods used in this study are presented. Firstly, the ethics pertaining to the research are explored. Secondly, the data types used in questionnaire-based research are outlined. Thirdly, the research instrument, i.e. the questionnaire, used for data gathering is described discussed. Fourthly, steps taken to ensure consistency in the research findings are outlined, as well as the process of choosing an appropriate sample group. Finally, the techniques used for data analysis are described.

Ethics

Ethics committee approval was granted to the research proposal before any data collection took place. A letter of consent was sent to the principal of the school outlining the aims and methods of the research (Appendix A1). Once consent was granted by the school, 45 consent forms were distributed to the parents/guardians of the children (Appendix A2). Of these, 5 did not give consent, 8 were not returned and 32 gave consent. A statement of consent was included at the top of the questionnaire forms for the children to complete (Appendix A3).

Informed consent ensures participants are given enough information about the research for them to decide whether to take part or not (Diener and Crandall, 1978). In consent forms the researcher is obliged to address how the research will be conducted and how the data will be treated (Denscombe, 2014). Providing participants with too much information has the potential to bias results (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). This was taken into consideration in the writing of the consent forms for parents/guardians and in the explanations given to the children before they participated.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Denscombe (2014) stresses that signing a consent form does not mean that the children were obliged to continue their agreement, and they have the right to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research. The children were asked if they understood this before they completed their statement of consent and any questions regarding the research procedure were welcomed. The letters of consent to the principal and to the parents/guardians included information on the confidentiality of the research, that the child's participation would remain strictly confidential and that their names would not be attached to any data provided by them. This was also explained to the children. To protect confidentiality, data from the hard copy questionnaires were destroyed and the data that was entered on Excel will be stored on a password secured computer for one year and will then be permanently deleted.

Data types

Quantitative.

Quantitative data are numerical and are the results of research methods such as experiments, observations, and questionnaires (Denscombe, 2014). Quantitative data can be statistically analysed and allows for a more straightforward approach to the interpretation and presentation of data, which means it is less open to error and subjectivity (ibid.). The disadvantage of quantitative research in questionnaires is that the findings may lack depth, and not include the motives or meaning behind the numbers (Cohen et al., 2007). Although this form of data is more concise and easier to analyse, it confines the participants responses, and does not allow them to express their opinions fully (Bell, 2010).

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Qualitative.

Qualitative data is comprised of spoken or written words or visual images (Denscombe, 2014). Qualitative research produces data that gives a broader perspective on research topics (Bell, 2010). The data gathered from qualitative research methods is more descriptive and insightful than numbers (Cohen, et al., 2007). Disadvantages of qualitative data are that they are difficult to quantify, and comparisons between respondents are difficult to make due to the variety of answers (ibid.).

Mixed methods.

Quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in tandem, i.e. a mixed methods approach, for collecting both numerical and opinion-based data (Cohen et al., 2007). This approach is used in this study, allowing for the advantages of both methods to be utilized, while offsetting their disadvantages.

Research instrument

Questionnaire design.

An anonymous questionnaire was designed in order to protect participants' confidentiality. The questionnaire was distributed in hardcopy format and contained 5 purely quantitative questions, 2 purely qualitative questions, and 2 involving both a quantitative and qualitative component (See Appendix B). Part 1 of the questionnaire comprises two personal questions to put participants at ease and give them a sense of autonomy (Cohen et al., 2007). Part 2 focuses

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

on the perceptions of the participants towards ISL and the Deaf community. Part 3 focuses on the participants attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community.

Closed-ended questions are used to gather quantitative data and open-ended questions to gather qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, open-ended questions were used to gather qualitative data. Nominal scales were used in the design of the closed-ended questions aimed at gathering quantitative data. Nominal scales are used for labelling variables that have no particular order (Bryman, 2016). Dichotomous and multiple-choice questions are treated as nominal scale data (Cohen et al., 2007). Dichotomous questions using Yes/No answer choice are used as a sorting device in questionnaire design (Cohen et al., 2007). For example, question 8 of the questionnaire:

Q.8.' Would you like to learn sign language in school all year? Yes / No

For questions that required more complexity than Yes/No answers, multiple choice questions are used (Cohen et al., 2007). For example, question 2 of the questionnaire:

Q.2. 'Is sign language a real language? Yes / No / I don't know'

The students were instructed to circle their answer. Questions that use a nominal scale should only measure one thing at a time (Cohen, et al., 2007). This was ensured in the formulation of the questions.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires were considered when selecting this research method. The advantages of using a questionnaire are that they involve little cost, time, and materials and are also an effective way of collecting a considerable amount of data (Denscombe, 2014). There is also less chance that the data will be affected by interpersonal factors in self-completion questionnaires (ibid.).

The main disadvantage associated with questionnaires is that the questions only give options for specific answers, the respondents are limited in their responses. The answers are structured to what the researcher wants (Denscombe, 2014). As previously mentioned, to balance this limitation, open-ended questions are posed as part of a mixed methods approach to give participants more opportunity to express their opinions on the topic. There are limitations to the use of self-reporting which stem from a variety of inherent biases, such as respondent recollection or truthfulness, however questionnaires are a valuable source for otherwise unrecorded information (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Validity and reliability

Reliability describes the consistency of research instruments i.e. their ability to replicate results under similar conditions (Bell, 2010; Punch, 2009). Reliability checks aim to find out if the research instrument would produce the same results at a different time, if all other variables remained the same (Denscombe, 2014). The validity of a research instrument is the extent to which it accurately measures or answers the research question, as described by Sapsford and Jupp (1996). In assessing the validity of a research instrument, it is important to investigate whether the right questions have been asked in relation to the research aim(s), and that they

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

conform to best practice according to published theories and knowledge on the topic (Denscombe, 2014). This was considered in the designing of the questionnaire. Sapsford and Jupp (1996) state that credible conclusions can be drawn from the research design if there is validity. One method used to check for reliability and validity, is to manually check the responses for consistency (Denscombe, 2014). This approach assumes that, for the same questions, similar respondents should give the same kind of responses (ibid.).

Piloting

Piloting assists in critically examining the research instrument and enhances reliability and validity, especially in terms of the wording of the questions used (Bell, 2010). Denscombe (2014) states that trying out the research tool on participants that resemble the sample group can highlight any issues that may otherwise arise during the actual research. This feedback can then lead to improvements in the research instrument before it is officially distributed to the sample group (ibid.).

The questionnaire was piloted and distributed to two children who were in the same age-group as the participants in the sample group. After their responses were gathered it was decided that some of the questions needed to be rephrased for comprehension purposes. For example, having to provide an explanation of the word ‘universal’ in question 4 (See Appendix B).

Sample

The sample group consisted of 32 hearing primary school pupils from 3rd– 6th class (aged 8 -12) in a mainstream English-speaking school in Dublin, Ireland. The children in the school had previously learned basic ISL and were briefly introduced to Deaf culture at the beginning of

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

these lessons. The location and access to the school were convenient as it was nearby, and the researcher was on school placement there as part of PME coursework. Cohen et al., (2007) note that access to a sample must be practical and permission to access the sample must also be granted. When accessing the sample group for this research a convenience sampling approach was used.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from hard copy questionnaires were manually entered into Excel Microsoft 2019, which was used to calculate the frequency of responses (e.g. 'Yes', 'No', 'I don't know', 'Sometimes') and present the data graphically using pie charts.

The qualitative data was also entered into Excel. Before qualitative data can be analysed it needs to be systematically organised (Denscombe, 2014). Content analysis is a method used to describe the content of qualitative text. A coding framework was used to organise the text into categories involving common themes (Schreier, 2012). The framework was devised after identifying re-occurring patterns in the text responses to open-ended questions. The codes used are presented in Table 1. A frequency analysis of each theme could then be performed using Excel. Responses for these questions may contain information which spans multiple codes, for this reason the response numbers presented may not add to the total number of respondents (i.e. Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5).

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Table 1: Codes used in content analysis of qualitative data.

Questions	Code	Sub-code
Q.3. Where have you seen sign language used?	Public spaces	Shops, Restaurants
		Public Transport, Unspecified
	Healthcare settings	Nursing home, Hospital
	Relatives	
	Television/TV	
	School	
	Unspecified	
	Nowhere	
Q.4. What is sign language?	d/Deaf people	
	Talk	
	Communicate	
	Language	
	Hands/Fingers	
Q. 8. [If yes] why do you want to learn sign language?	Enjoyment	Fun, Cool, Interesting, Good
	Communicate with d/Deaf people	
	To help d/Deaf people	
	sign language	
	French	
Q. 9. [If yes] what languages were they?	Spanish	
	Italian	
	Japanese	
	Polish	

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Conclusion

This research used closed and open-ended questions in the questionnaire design to gather quantitative and qualitative data. This mixed method approach produced numerical and opinion based data, which was analysed accordingly. The questions focused on the children's perceptions and attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community. The following chapter will present the results from the questionnaire.

Chapter 4: Presentation of data

In this section, the author will present the results from the questionnaire. The results highlight the responses of 32 participants. The results are organised in the order the questions appear in the questionnaire (See Appendix B).

Children's perception of d/Deaf people's use of sign language (Q1)

The first question asked participants if all d/Deaf people use sign language. The results in **Error! Reference source not found.** show that 63% (n=20) said that not all d/Deaf people use sign language. It also shows that 16% (n=5) thought that all d/Deaf people use sign language and that 22% (n=7) were not sure if they did or not.

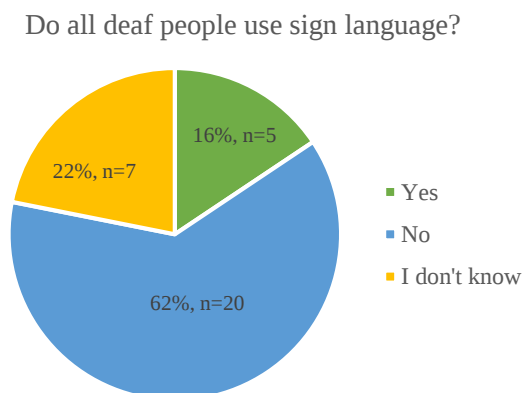


Figure 1: Children's perception of d/Deaf people's use of sign language.

Children's perception of the legitimacy of sign language (Q2)

The second question asked participants if they classify sign language as a real language or not, as a measure of perceived legitimacy. The responses are shown below in **Error! Reference source not found..** The results show that most of the children (81%, n = 26) said sign language

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

is a real language. The remaining figures show that 16% (n=5) said sign language is not a real language and 3% (n=1) said they did not know.

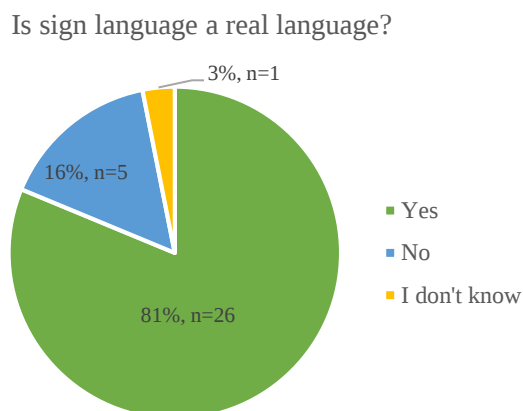


Figure 2: Children's perception of the legitimacy of sign language.

Settings in which respondents had encountered sign language being used (Q3)

Table 2 shows the various settings in which respondents had encountered sign language being used. The results show that the majority, 47% (n=15), of respondents reported seeing sign language used in public spaces. The public spaces mentioned were mostly shops, followed by public transport and restaurants. A sizable cohort, 41% (n=13), reported seeing sign language used in a classroom setting. Roughly one in five, 22% (n=7), reported seeing it used on the television. Some respondents 6% (n=2), reported seeing sign language used in healthcare settings, namely a hospital and a nursing home, and 6% (n=2), reported seeing it used by family members. The remaining 3% (n=1) said they had not seen sign language used anywhere.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Table 2: Settings in which children had encountered sign language being used.

Settings	Number	Percentage
In public spaces	15	47%
At school (ISL lessons)	13	41%
On television	7	22%
Used by family members	2	6%
In healthcare settings	2	6%
Nowhere	1	3%

Children's perception of sign language as its own natural language (Q4)

Participants were asked if sign language is a universal language (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Almost half, 47% (n=15), of respondents did not know if sign language was universal or not. The remaining results show that 16% (n=5) of respondents said sign language is a universal language and 38% (n=12) said sign language is not a universal language.

Is sign language a universal language?
(Is it the same in every country?)

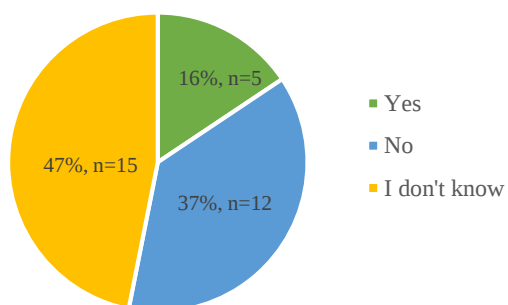


Figure 3: Children's perception of sign language as its own natural language.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Children's descriptions of sign language (Q5)

Question five asked participants what sign language is. The various descriptions are thematically organized and presented in Table 3. The findings show that 67% (n=21) of respondents referred to sign language as a way for d/Deaf people to 'talk' or 'communicate'. It was specified by 6% (n=2) of respondents that sign language is not used by all d/Deaf people. It was referred to by 59% (n= 19) as a language. The words 'hands' or 'fingers' were used by 47% (n=15) of respondents when describing sign language.

Table 3: Children's descriptions of sign language.

Description	Number	Percentage
How d/Deaf people talk/communicate	21	67%
Specified that sign language is a language	19	59%
Used the words 'hands' and/or 'fingers'	15	47%
Specified that it is not used by all d/Deaf people	2	6%

Children's attitudes towards learning sign language (Q6)

The children were asked if they enjoyed learning sign language. The results in Figure 4 show a positive attitude towards sign language. Almost all respondents, 97% (n=31), expressed that they liked learning sign language. Only 3% (n=1) said they did not enjoy learning the language.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Do you like learning sign language?

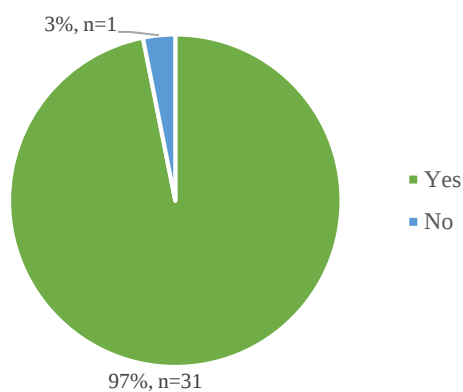


Figure 4: Children's attitudes towards learning sign language.

Children's attitudes towards the difficulty of learning sign language (Q7)

As shown in Figure 5 below, 13% (n=4) of participants admitted to finding sign language difficult to learn. The remaining figures show that 34% (n=11) did not find it challenging and over half (53%, n=17) of the respondents said sign language was sometimes hard to learn.

Do you find it hard to learn?

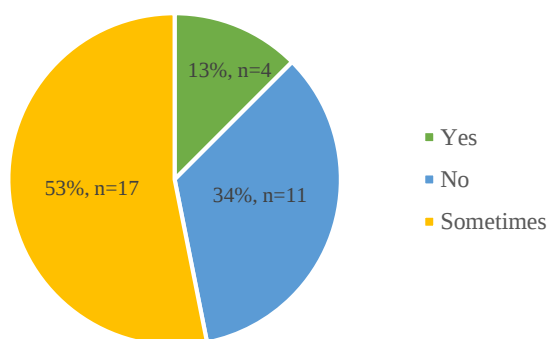


Figure 5: Children's attitudes towards the difficulty of learning sign language.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Children's attitudes towards learning sign language in school (Q8)

Participants were asked if they would like to learn sign language in school all year. The findings are shown in Figure 6 below. The majority (72%, n=23) of respondents answered that they would like to learn sign language all year round. The remaining 28% (n=9) said they would not want to continue learning sign language.

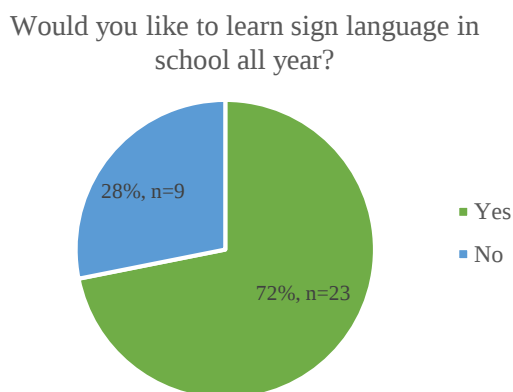


Figure 6: Children's attitudes towards learning sign language in school.

The 72% (n=23) of respondents who said yes to wanting to learn sign language, were then queried on what their reasons for wanting to learn sign language were. The thematic results from this question are shown below in Table 4. Over half (57%, n=13) of these respondents said they wanted to learn sign language either to talk to d/Deaf people, to communicate with d/Deaf people or to help them. The table shows that 30% (n=7) said they wanted to learn sign language either because they liked it, or they thought it was cool, interesting, fun or good to learn. The remaining 13% (n=3) said they would like to learn sign language “in case if any family or friends or people” ask them, because their “grandmother is going deaf” and “it helps you learn”.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Table 4: Why the children want to learn sign language.

Reason	Number	Percentage
To talk to/communicate with/help d/Deaf people	13	57%
Because they like it/ it is cool/interesting/fun/good	7	30%
Other	3	13%

Teaching of other languages in school (Q9)

The majority of respondents, 67% (n=21) reported that they had learned languages other than English or Irish in school (Figure 7). The remaining 34% (n=11) said they had not learned any other language.

Have you learned any other languages in school that were not Irish or English?

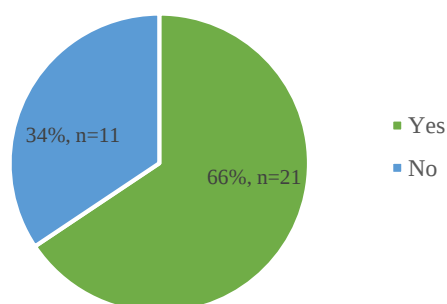


Figure 7: Children who learned languages other than English/Irish in school.

The 67% (n=21) of respondents who answered yes were then queried on what the other languages were. The results from this are shown in

Table 5.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Table 5: Languages (other than English/Irish) taught in school.

Reason	Number	Percentage
French	9	43%
ISL	8	38%
Spanish	5	24%
Japanese	2	10%
Italian	1	5%
Polish	1	5%

Conclusion

The results presented above point in the direction of an overall positive perception and attitude towards ISL and the Deaf community, with 81% (n=26) of the children recognising sign language as a legitimate language, and 97% (n=31) saying they enjoyed learning ISL. The following chapter will discuss the results in further detail and place them in the context of previous literature relevant to this study.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Chapter 5: Analysis and discussion

In this chapter the results are discussed and analysed in the context of previous studies. In light of ISL being recognised as an official language of the State in 2017, this research aims to discover hearing children's (participants) perception of ISL and the Deaf community, as well as their attitudes towards the language and the people in the Deaf community. This research was conducted through the distribution of 32 anonymous questionnaires in a mainstream national school in Dublin. Participants have previously learned basic ISL and Deaf culture. There is a pupil in the school who is deaf and does not use sign language. New findings from the study will be addressed as well as suggestions for further research and any limitations associated with the research.

Perceptions of sign language and the Deaf community

Language recognition.

A study by Feeney (2015) presents the ways in which ISL and the Deaf community are perceived by both Deaf and hearing individuals. The study distributed anonymous questionnaires to Deaf and hearing adults who were employed or volunteering in organisations that worked alongside the Deaf community in Ireland (ibid.). The current study presents hearing children's perceptions and attitudes. The 32 children in the current study were asked if sign language is a real language. The results showed a positive perception of ISL with the majority, 81% (n=26), perceiving sign language as a legitimate language (ibid.). There were 38 participants in Feeney's (2015) study involving 61% (n=23) Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and 39% (n=15) hearing adults. Slightly fewer than the current study, 69% (n=20) perceived ISL as equal to other languages,

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

14% (n=4) perceived ISL as less than spoken languages/not recognised at all, and 17% (n=5) perceived ISL as less than the majority language, but equal to other minority languages (ibid.). Feeney's (2015) research is a partial replication of studies by Kyle and Allsop (1997) and Leeson and Sheikh (2008).

In the study by Kyle and Allsop (1997), 30% of Irish participants regarded ISL as equal to other languages and 50% perceived sign language as less than spoken languages/not recognised at all (ibid.). The research by Leeson and Sheikh (2008) showed the perceived status of signed languages in five countries in the European Union; United Kingdom, Ireland, Czech Republic, Finland and Poland. Irish participants made up 8.6% (n=22) of the sample group, however a breakdown of the perceptions of Irish participants are not stratified. The majority of the overall study participants (69%, n=138) perceived sign language as less than spoken languages/not recognised at all, with only 6% (n=12) perceiving sign language as equal to other languages (ibid.).

It is evident that the studies by Kyle and Allsop (1997) and Leeson and Sheikh (2008) show a negative perception of ISL/ sign language in comparison to the overall positive perception shown in the current study and in the study by Feeney (2015). Though sample sizes are low and not directly comparable, this may imply that societal perception of the legitimacy of sign language has been improving. It must be noted that ISL was not recognised as an official language of the State for Kyle and Allsop's study in 1997, or Feeney's study in 2015. The negative perception of sign language shown in the former may be reflective of this, and the apparent increase in perceived legitimacy shown in the latter appears to mirror the growing awareness of ISL leading up to official State recognition in 2017 (ISL Act, 2017).

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Signed languages are natural languages, meaning they developed independently through culture and history (Baynton, 2002). More than half of the participants in the current study (63%, n=20), either thought that sign language was a universal language, or did not know if it was or not (ibid.). This lack of awareness reflects the negative perceptions of sign language from the findings of Kyle and Allsop (1997) and Leeson and Sheikh (2008). Although most of the results from the current study reflect a positive perception of ISL, this reveals a certain lack of awareness.

Qualitative data from the current study found that most of the children (67%, n=21) perceived sign language as a method of communication used by d/Deaf people, and 6% (n=2) specified that it is only used by some d/Deaf people. The word 'language' was frequently used when describing sign language (59%, n=19) (ibid.). Feeney's (2015) study used quantitative research methods (multiple choice questions) in an anonymous questionnaire to determine participants' descriptions of the sign/word they use to refer to the communication of Deaf people. 'Signing' was selected by 24% (n=7) of participants, 'sign language' was selected by 69% (n=20) and 'gesture language' was chosen by 3% (n=1) (ibid.). This indicates that adults are familiar with general sign language terminology. The current study adds to this knowledge, with the inclusion of children's perceptions of the language. The description 'gesture language' or similar was not used by participants in the current study, which shows a positive perception of sign language as a legitimate language.

Use of sign language.

Where and when participants come in contact with ISL and the Deaf community is relevant to the current study as it reflects where ISL is being used. Participant's perceptions of

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

ISL and the Deaf community will be based on these interactions. In Feeney's (2015) study there was a response rate of 95% (n=36) when participants were asked how frequently they interact with members of the Irish Deaf community. The majority (81%, n=29) said they were in contact with members of the Irish Deaf community every day (ibid.). This is most likely due to the sample group being comprised of Deaf and hearing adults who were employed by or volunteering in organisations in the Deaf community. Most of the children in the current study (47%, n=15), had seen sign language used in public spaces. A lot of the children (41%, n=13) mentioned that they had seen it in school, and 22% (n=7) had seen sign language used on television (ibid.). These results show that a relatively high proportion of children in this study have had some form of interaction with ISL and the Irish Deaf community, from which they can base their perceptions.

Participants in the current study were asked if all d/Deaf people use sign language. We know from numerous literature on sign language and Deaf studies that sign language is not used by all d/Deaf people (Leigh, et al., 2018; Conama, 2019; Leeson and Saeed, 2012). Findings from the 2016 census in Ireland support this, indicating that there are significantly more d/Deaf/hearing impaired people in Ireland than there are ISL users. The results from the 2016 census showed that 2.2% (n=10,3676) people (identified as deaf or had a serious hearing impairment. The number of ISL users is significantly lower, with 0.09% (n=4,228) of people (d/Deaf and hearing) saying they used ISL. The current research reflects the literature, and the latest Census figures. The majority of children (63%, n=20) answered that not all d/Deaf people use sign language (ibid.).

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community

Language and motivation.

Although research on the socio-linguistic perceptions of sign language is limited, there have been many studies that look at the attitudes towards signed languages and Deaf people (Krausneker, 2015). A study by O'Neill, Gill and Brown (2005) in London involved undergraduate medical students, aged 21-23 years. Participants completed a 72 hour course on BSL and Deaf awareness (ibid.). Qualitative and quantitative data on the students feedback and enjoyment of the course were gathered using questionnaires (ibid.). From the 52 students, 92% (n=48) said they enjoyed learning British Sign Language (BSL) (ibid.). The current study involved the sample group (having learned basic ISL a year previous) completing a questionnaire to find their perspectives and attitudes towards ISL. Despite the differences between the sample group of O'Neill et al. (2005) and the current study, both studies reflect attitudes towards languages used by Deaf communities and similarities can be found in the results. In the current study 97% (n=31) of children said they enjoyed learning ISL. The results from the current study add to those from O'Neill et al. (2005), demonstrating children's enjoyment in learning sign language.

Out of 72% (n=23) children in the current study who said they wanted to continue learning ISL, 52% (n=13) said they wanted to learn ISL to talk to/communicate with/help d/Deaf people, and 30% (n=7) said they wanted to learn it because they like it/it is cool/interesting/fun/good. Only 4% (n=1) said they wanted to learn it for a d/Deaf relative. This awareness of ISL and the Deaf community is reflective of Freire's idea of 'human sensibility', i.e. the ability to have concern not only for ourselves but for the wider society (Freire, 1996). The children in the

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

current study showed their concern and understanding for the wider society, demonstrated by the high proportion of those wanting to learn ISL to talk to/communicate with/help d/Deaf people.

A study by DeMeulder (2018) shows some of the motivations behind sign language learning. In their study, data emerged from interviews with d/Deaf and hearing ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ (sign language introduced at birth/young age) signers (aged 18-62) in Flanders, Belgium. The second source was that of observations made by the researcher, DeMeulder (2018), who is a Deaf researcher and ‘new signer’ based in Europe. Motivations for hearing children learning sign language were through Deaf parents/relatives or enrolment in Baby Sign classes. Motivation for hearing adults learning sign language stemmed from interest in the language, their own economic advantage, course credits, or wanting to communicate with d/Deaf relatives (ibid.). Some of these motivators (namely interest and Deaf relatives) correspond with the motivations expressed by the children in our study. To support the results from our research, further investigation using research methods used by DeMeulder, using interviews or focus groups with the children, could highlight more motivators for learning sign language.

Key word signing.

A study by Bowles and Frizelle (2016) looked at children’s attitudes towards the use of a signing system by children with Down syndrome (DS), in mainstream schools in Southern Ireland. Interviews were used to gather qualitative data which was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis procedures (ibid.). The sample group consisted of 8 children, aged 6-8, from two schools. The current study consisted of 32 children from a mainstream school in Dublin, aged 8-12. Both schools in the study by Bowles and Frizelle (2016) had a child with DS who used Lámh (the Irish key word signing (KWS) system). There was a deaf child attending the

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

school from the current study, but they did not use ISL. In the study by Bowles and Frizelle (2016) the class teacher in school A had completed Lámh module one, and the class teacher in school B was learning Lámh from the school principal who had completed Lámh module one. In the current study, the children were taught ISL by the researcher, who has a degree in Deaf studies. In the study by Bowles and Frizelle (2016) one child from each school was chosen because they were identified by the child with DS as being their best friend. Three other children from each school were chosen randomly by the class teacher (ibid.). Convenience sampling was used to select the sample group in the current study and anonymous questionnaires were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data. In the current study 66% (n=31) of the participants admitted to finding ISL difficult to learn/sometimes difficult to learn. All of the participants in Bowles and Frizelle (2016) found it difficult to remember the signs and some of them found it difficult to make the signs. Although it must be acknowledged that the study by Bowles and Frizelle (2016) is KWS and not sign language, the results show similarities with the current study regarding the children's attitudes toward the difficulty of learning signed communication.

Learning ISL in school.

Freire (2005) often refers to teachers and educators playing an important role in the journey to escape oppression. Teachers have the opportunity to raise awareness of ISL and Deaf culture. The children in the current study were asked if they wanted to learn ISL in school on a regular basis. The results showed a positive attitude towards learning ISL at school, with 72% (n=23) of the respondents saying that they would like to learn ISL all year round (ibid.). Participants demonstrated an appreciation for learning KWS in school; 'It's more fun than doing like maths and all like Irish' (Bowles and Frizelle, 2016, p. 288). The qualitative results from

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Bowles and Frizelle (2016) give more detailed data on attitudes towards learning KWS in school. Further study using interviews might give more insight into why the children in the current study enjoyed learning ISL in school.

Attitudes towards languages.

As well as examining the use of ISL in the school, the current study sought to identify what other languages were being taught. Out of the 66% (n=22) of children from the current study that said they had learned another language other than Irish or English in school, 87% (n=18) said they had learned a foreign language. As part of a national consultation process in Ireland called ‘Your Education System’, a representative sample of (n=1,511) people ages 15+ years completed a survey (Kellaghan, McGee, Millar and Perkins, 2004). The results showed that 57% (n=861) thought ‘too little emphasis’ was being placed on teaching foreign languages in primary school, and 78% (n=1,179) considered teaching a continental language in primary school to be ‘very important/important’ (Kellaghan, et al., 2004: pp. 26, 35). In the current study, the languages mentioned were French, Spanish, Japanese, Italian and Polish. The findings from the current study demonstrate the value placed by teachers in the school on teaching foreign languages, which is reflective of the study by Kellaghan et al. (2004). Further research could indicate how many primary schools in Ireland have taught about ISL and Deaf culture, in comparison to teaching about foreign languages and cultures. Freire speaks of ‘cultural invasion’ (Darder, 2018). In this instance we can see the majority languages, as well as foreign languages, ‘oppressing’ sign language.

A study in 2018 by Lee and Pott addresses the importance of teaching language and culture together. The study involved a basic demographic survey and two questionnaires to 98

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

university students (aged 18-33) attending a South-eastern American university (ibid.). The students in the current study were aged 8-12 years and attended a mainstream primary school in Ireland. The students in the study by Lee and Pott (2018), were enrolled in either an American Sign Language (ASL) or Deaf culture course (Lee and Pott, 2018). The teachers for both courses were Deaf (ibid.). It must also be acknowledged here that although the researcher teaching the children ISL in the current study was not Deaf, the children were introduced to Deaf culture as an introduction to their ISL lessons. The study by Lee and Pott (2018) demonstrated that students in Deaf culture courses had more of a cultural perspective on ASL and Deaf people than the students in basic ASL courses, which co-occurred with more positive attitudes. The study by Lee and Pott (2018) supports a previous study by Brightman (2013), indicating that taking an ASL class does not affect students' attitudes towards d/Deaf people. These findings suggest that there is an argument for the importance of teaching about Deaf culture when teaching sign language, as this could influence students' attitudes towards d/Deaf people and the Deaf community. In the current study it could be argued that some of the results on attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community could stem from the teaching of Deaf culture along with ISL. Given the findings from these previous studies, and the overwhelmingly positive results in the current study, it is reasonable to conclude that the concurrent teaching of both ISL and Deaf culture may result in more positive perceptions and attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community.

Limitations

To avoid generalization and acknowledge bias that could not be controlled by the researcher, it is important to note the various limitations associated with the study (Cohen, et al., 2007):

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

- Due to the participants' previous experiences of ISL being connected to the researcher, there is potential that the results may reflect some of the researchers perceptions and attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community. The researcher has an interest in Deaf studies which gives the potential for a narrowed lens and a bias towards the research.
- The findings do not reflect a broad opinion as they only reflect the voice of children between the ages of 8 and 12.
- The sample size is not substantial enough to be reflective of all children. The results reflect the perspectives and attitudes of 32 hearing children from a mainstream school in Dublin, Ireland, thus the results cannot be generalised.
- The accuracy of the results is affected by the children's memory. For example, all of the students were taught ISL, but in question 9 only 38% stated they had. This may be an indication of poor memory, or may be indicative of their perception of ISL as a legitimate language.
- The methodology used could be described as restrictive as it limits the children's responses as well as the researcher's questions.
- The d/Deaf population in Ireland is relatively small, and the population of ISL users, smaller again. Deaf studies in Ireland is a niche area and there is a limited amount of research on ISL and Deaf culture in Ireland. Some of the literature reviewed for this research is limited to studies from abroad which makes the research less relative.
- Finally, it is important to note that the findings are not transferable across all primary schools as ISL is not taught in the curriculum.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

Most of the children believed sign language to be a legitimate language, which suggests a perceived parity in status with spoken languages. This reflects the official recognition of ISL in Ireland (ISL Act, 2017). The majority of children surveyed in this study were also aware that not all d/Deaf people use sign language, for example, when asked to describe sign language one child wrote: “sign language is a language that deaf people use sometimes”. Both a positive perception of the status of ISL and an awareness of the d/Deaf community are clearly demonstrated in the results. Notwithstanding these positive perceptions of ISL and the Deaf community, there is a misconception among most of the participants that sign language is a universal language, i.e. that it is the same in every country.

Most of the children found ISL difficult or sometimes difficult to learn. Despite it being challenging, all bar one child, said they enjoyed learning ISL. This result reflects an overall positive attitude towards the learning of ISL. The children also demonstrated an understanding of the value of learning ISL to communicate with the Deaf community, for example, one child wrote “I want to learn sign language because I want to communicate with deaf people”.

Although the majority of children said they would like to continue learning ISL in school, the study highlighted that foreign languages were taught in primary schools over other national languages, namely ISL and Cant. The study also highlighted where the children’s perceptions of and attitudes towards ISL and the Deaf community stemmed from. Over half of the participants had seen ISL used in public spaces and in school (ISL lessons). This shows how a school environment can influence children’s perceptions and attitudes towards a language, which in this case proved to be an overall positive response towards ISL and the Deaf community.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Recommendations for policymakers;

- For the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to offer ISL as a language choice for the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. This would be a way of both introducing future teachers to ISL and the Deaf community, and increasing broader societal knowledge.
- As key stakeholders, it is important that the NCCA as well as the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) and the Irish Deaf Society (IDS) are included in consultation regarding any future steps that may be taken to introduce ISL into the national curriculum.

Recommendations for primary schools;

- Raise awareness of ISL and Deaf culture through the Geography strand of Human Environments and the Social, Personal and Health Education strand of Myself and Others.
- Mark ISL awareness week in school calendars, and organise lessons or talks.

Recommendations for colleges of education;

- Include coursework on ISL and Deaf culture as part of primary teacher education, perhaps as part of a revised curriculum for Inclusive Education.
- Encourage primary teacher education students to join or start a college sign language Society .
- Promote ISL classes provides by the IDS.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Recommendations for further studies;

- These findings indicate that concurrent teaching of Deaf culture and history alongside ISL instruction may have the potential to positively impact children's perceptions of ISL and the Deaf community. The researcher recommends further studies to investigate this.
- The author recommends future studies be conducted nationally in primary and secondary level settings with larger sample sizes and more qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of perceptions and attitudes of schoolchildren.

Reflection

This research exercise has been a rewarding experience, allowing me to combine my previous contact with Deaf Studies and the Deaf community from my undergraduate degree, and my interests in primary school teaching. I have gained insights into how the primary curriculum can promote awareness of ISL throughout society. I look forward to continuing my professional development in this area.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letters of consent

Appendix A1: Letter to the principal.

Dear Principal,

I am writing to ask for your help with a research study that investigates hearing children's awareness of and attitudes towards Irish Sign Language and the Deaf community. The research project involves learning more about the attitudes hearing children have towards Irish Sign Language. Irish Sign Language was recently recognised as an official language in Ireland. In my research I will be investigating whether this change in status has influenced hearing children's awareness of Irish Sign Language in primary schools, and if there is an interest among students in mainstream hearing schools to learn Irish Sign Language.

I would be grateful if you could grant me permission to conduct this research in your school with students from third to sixth class, with consent from the children and their parents/guardians. I will be gathering the data through self-administered anonymous questionnaires. I have attached a copy of the questionnaire to this letter.

For more information about the study please contact me at dmccannpme18@momail.mie.ie. This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. The child's participation will remain strictly confidential. Their names will not be attached to any of the data they provide. Participants are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should they wish to do so. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact Miriam.Colum@mie.ie.

Yours sincerely,

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Appendix A2: Letter to the Parent/Guardian.

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a master's student in Marino Institute of Education. For my dissertation I am researching hearing children's awareness of and attitudes towards Irish Sign Language and the Deaf community. I will be gathering the data through self-administered anonymous questionnaires in the school.

For more information about the study please contact me at dmccannpme18@momail.mie.ie.

This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. The child's participation will remain strictly confidential. Their names will not be attached to any of the data they provide. Participants are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should they wish to do so. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact Miriam.Colum@mie.ie.

Yours sincerely,

Please complete **one** of the two options below:

1. I **do** consent to allow my child _____ to participate in the questionnaire. (print child's name)
2. I do **not** wish my child _____ to participate in the questionnaire. (Print child's name)

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Appendix A3: Participant Statement of Consent.

Do not write your name on the page!

Thank you for taking part in this research. You can stop anytime you want. Please circle 'Yes' if you understand the research and want to take part and 'No' if you do not.

Yes

No

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Part 1

What age are you? _____

What class are you in? _____

Part 2

1. Do all deaf people use sign language?

Yes

No

I don't know

2. Is sign language a real language?

Yes

No

I don't know

3. Where have you seen sign language used?

4. Is sign language a universal language? (Is it the same in every country?)

Yes

No

I don't know

5. What is sign language?

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISL AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Part 3

6. Do you like learning sign language?

Yes No

7. Do you find it hard to learn?

Yes No Sometimes

8. Would you like to learn sign language in school all year?

Yes No

If **yes**, why do you want to learn sign language?

9. Have you learned any other languages in school that were not Irish or English?

Yes No

If **yes**, what languages were they? _____