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DIGITAL PRACTICES IN AND OUT OF THE CLIL CLASSROOM: ÉIRE/IRELAND

A Report by CLILNetLE Working Group 4

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NOTE. This country report presents results from the Irish dataset, collected as part of two pan-European surveys administered by WG4 of the COST Action CLILNetLE. For the main report see *Digital Practices in and out of the CLIL Classroom: A pan-European survey of students and teachers*.

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1. Digital Literacies Student Survey (DLSS): Éire/Ireland

1.1. Introduction

The survey was conducted in Ireland across two Irish-Medium schools located in urban areas in March-April 2024. Both of these schools were chosen because they have pre-arranged agreements with parents/carers to allow them to participate in research projects. The survey was undertaken in small groups where the students were withdrawn from their classrooms and brought to a separate classroom to undertake the survey. Students were recruited on a voluntary basis, most of whom chose to participate. It is clear that by undertaking the survey in the school environment with the researcher, students were able to complete the survey almost fully. However, if the researchers had not been there, we felt that the students would have found it difficult to complete. In this case, the researcher was there to explain terminology and breakdown questions. For example, many students did not understand the meaning of CLIL given that in Ireland we use the term 'Immersion'. Also, it was difficult to recruit schools to participate in the survey during March and April because this is when schools are in the midst of revision for the third (16-17 year old) and sixth year (18-19 year old) classes.

CLIL does not exist in Ireland in the same form as is found in most European countries. In Ireland, content and language integrated learning takes the form of Immersion Education whereby students learn all subjects through Irish or Gaeilge, a minorised language. Irish Immersion Education (IME) has a long history in Ireland, beginning in the early 1950s and flourishing in the 1970s onwards. Today, over 60,000 students learn through Irish at primary and secondary level, which represents around 10.75% of the entire student population and its popularity continues to rise.

1.2. Summary of main findings

- As research in the Irish context has shown regarding the profile of parents/carers of children who are engaged in IME, this cohort of participants also reflects the fact that they are more likely to come from backgrounds where the parents/carers are graduates from Third Level.
- CLIL classrooms in IME, from the perspective of students, are primarily for the learning of content and language. Students perceive classrooms to be multilingual despite this view perhaps jarring with the aims of IME.
- Very few students who engage in CLIL learning in IME use Irish extramurally. A very small proportion use Irish to speak to relatives or friends online.

- Digital activities that feature prominently extramurally for young people are multiplayer gaming, online shopping, paid and free educational applications. By far the most prominent digital activity is online research that is important for the learning of Irish in CLIL contexts. Online research is also prominent in school along with the use of e-book readers. However, despite social media and messaging being important in the lifeworlds of young people, they are not considered as important for the learning of Irish in IME.
- Learners access the internet everywhere, and extramurally use more mobile technologies, which is perhaps reflective of this wide range of access to the internet. In school, the use of more traditional computer-based technologies (i.e., laptops) is more common than tablets, whereas the reverse is true at home. Mobile phones are the most commonly used digital technology both extramurally and in school, although the use is more prominent outside of school.
- Despite Ireland being a highly developed new economy, the digital divide in terms of access to the internet or having digital skills is evident in the issues that young people have in terms of access to technology.
- Teachers and school policies are the greatest inhibitors to the use of technology in school, whereas parents are the greatest facilitators outside of school.
- Smart technologies play an important role in the daily lives of learners but rarely in school.

1.3. Participant background

All participants who took part in the DLSS were from Ireland and from County Cork. After Dublin, Cork is the largest county in Ireland. The **age range of learners** that participated in the survey in the Irish context fell between 13 and 16 years, with the vast majority between the 14-15 years. There were around 10 participants that were in the older age group as well. However, given that the questionnaire was administered at the time of year when preparation for state examinations is at its height, the age profile here is understandable.
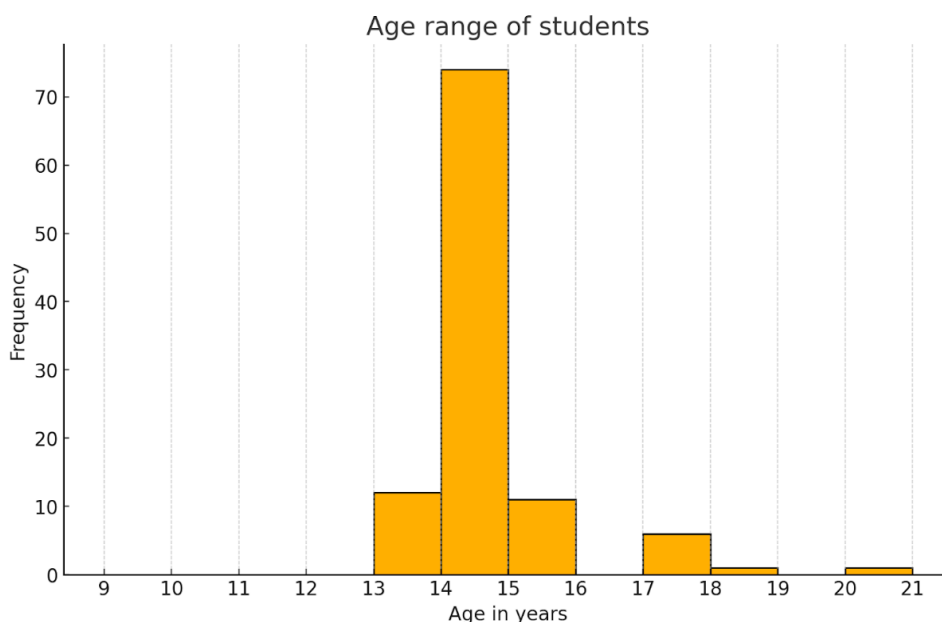
In terms of the **number of years that they had been in school**, there is a possibility that this question was misunderstood given that we were in place when we administered the questionnaire. The pie chart on the left gives the actual responses given by students. However, the pie chart on the left is a reconfigured version. In the reconfigured version, we combined those that chose 1, 3, 8, and 9 years and those that chose 5, 6, 7, 10, and 11 years. We felt that participants misunderstood the question and instead counted the number of years that they had been in school altogether or the number of years that they had been in post-Primary school. The pie chart on the right, which is split into Junior Cycle (12-16) and Senior Cycle (17-19), illustrates the two phases of post-Primary education in Ireland and paints a more accurate representation of the participants to whom the questionnaire was administered.
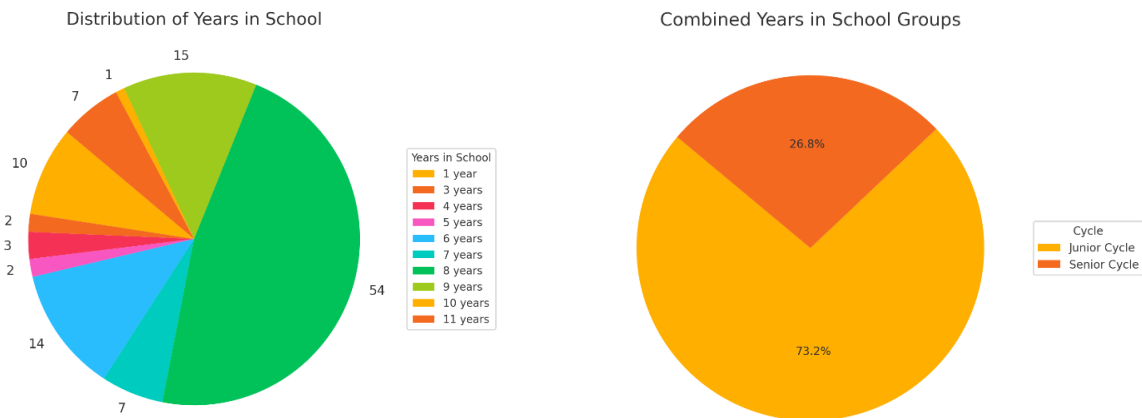
The **gender distribution** here is reasonably equal with 55 participants identifying as girls, 53 identifying as boys, and 4 not declaring their gender. According to education indicators for Ireland (DOE & DOFHERIS, 2024, p. 49), the number of students enrolled in Irish-medium post-Primary schools (secondary) is approximately 15,783 (of a total of 406,392 students) where 54% are female and 46% are male. This suggests that the gender split obtained in the Irish data as part of the DLSS is representative of the wider gender split in IME.
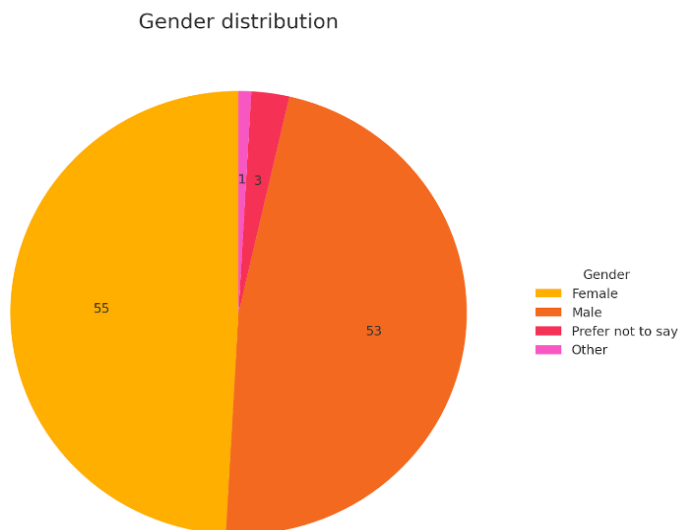
In terms of the **highest level of parents' education**, over half of participants' parents/carers had a level of education that was at undergraduate level or above. Indeed, more parents/carers had a postgraduate qualification as opposed to an undergraduate qualification. This aligns with research undertaken by Strickland and Hickey (2016) who explored the socioeconomic profiles of families whose children were enrolled in IME and found that they were more likely to come from a more highly educated, socioeconomic group than those who were not engaged in IME.
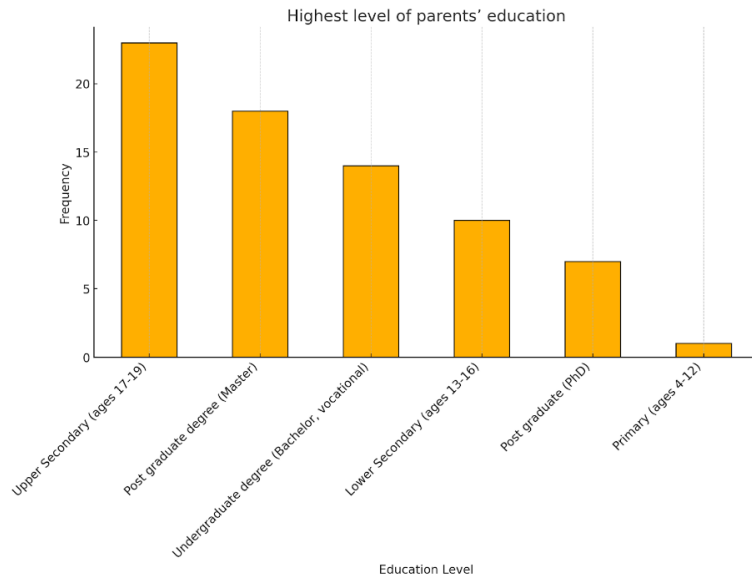
When it comes to the language profiles of students, unsurprisingly, the vast majority of participants who took the survey declared English to be their **main home language**, with only around 20 claiming it to be Irish. This is reflective of the wider sociolinguistic situation of Irish being a minority language in Ireland. Interestingly, there was a wider range of other languages spoken as home languages by some participants, which does contrast with recent government statistics in Ireland that suggest that only 1.4% of those who attend IME post-Primary schools have non-Irish nationality (DoE, 2022, p. 31).
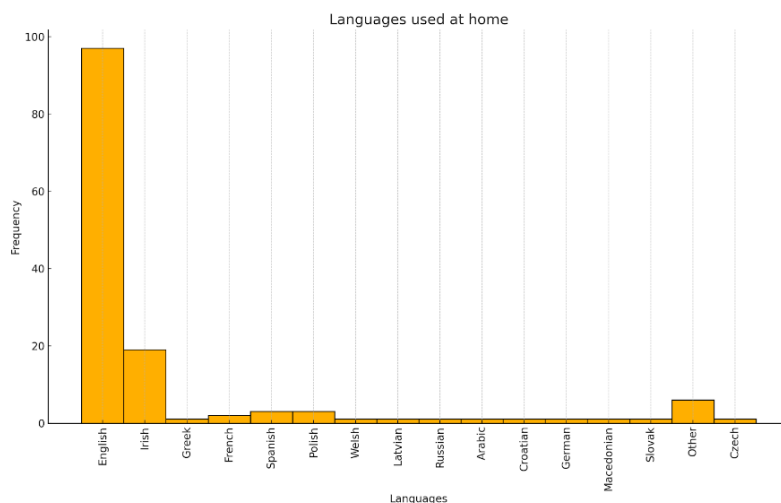
Further analysis of the language profiles of DLSS participants in Ireland shows that while some used a variety of languages, including Irish and Polish (the most prevalent languages in Ireland besides English) with **family and relatives who live elsewhere**, with friends online and with friends outside of school, the vast majority of participants used English. This fact again aligns to what would be expected of the normal uses of Irish in the wider country, given its minorised status limited principally to the domain of education. However, one small feature that is interesting is that 10 participants claimed to use Irish **with people online,** whereas 16 used Irish in face-2-face scenarios with **friends outside of school**. Although more data is required here, this suggests that the use of Irish is not so prevalent in the digital domain. Also, those students that spoke other languages other than English or Irish appeared to use those languages online, particularly those who were Spanish or French. The use of Polish here is also interesting, suggesting that it is a language that is used with family and relatives, but that it is not used with friends online or friends outside of school to any significant extent. Polish is the second most spoken language in Ireland according to the recent census (CSO, 2023), yet it appears that the language is limited to international or intergenerational communication rather than peer communication. Overall, for Irish, this suggests that contact with Irish outside of the CLIL classroom is limited for most but for a small group of multilingual students, for which contact with languages other than English or Irish is more common.
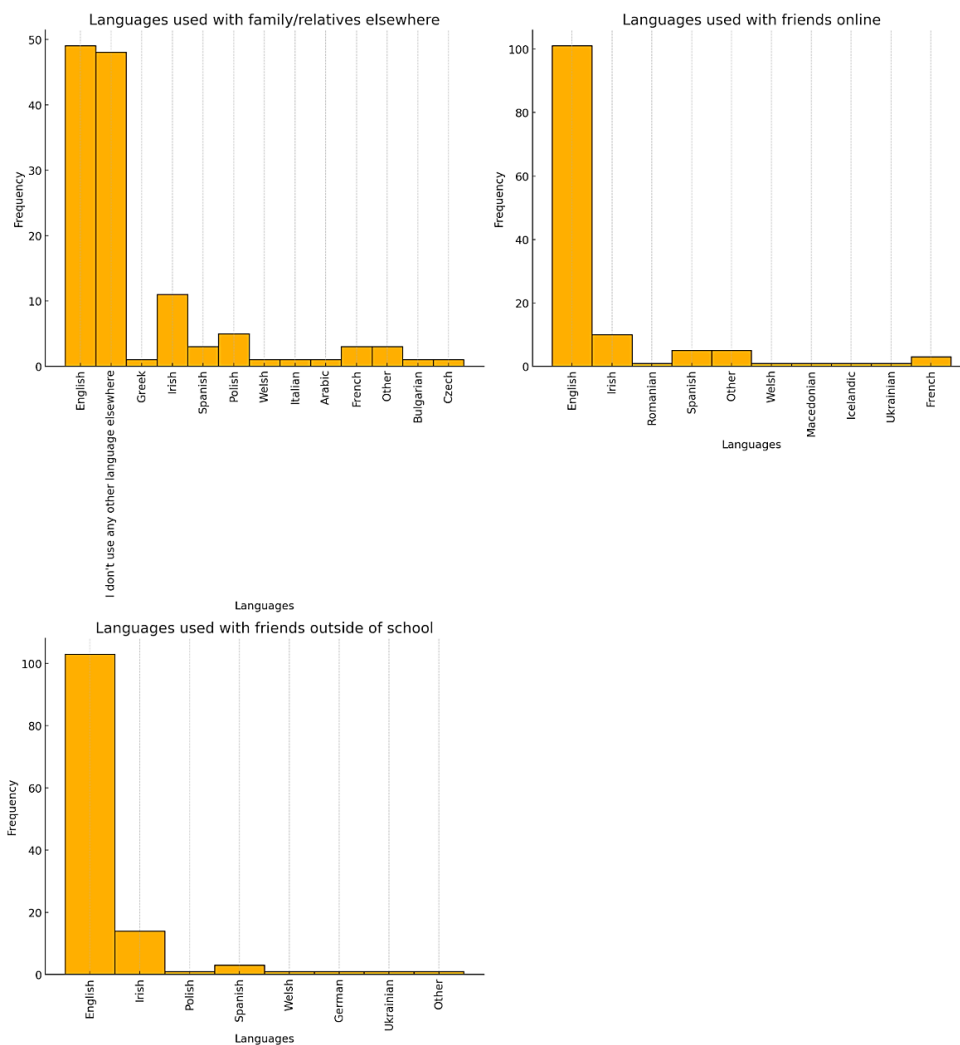
When it comes to the language that participants considered to be the **main language of schooling**, the vast majority chose Irish. However, 19 students also chose English as their main language of schooling, despite IME traditionally following a strict immersion approach whereby all parts of learners' education are conducted through Irish. This is supported by the idea, confirmed in similar research contexts (Arocena, et al., 2015; Lewis, et al., 2012) that translanguaging between a minority and majority languages that share the same linguascape can be detrimental to the former. Nonetheless, it appears that some participants consider English usage to be more prevalent than Irish.

Participants' Main Language of Schooling
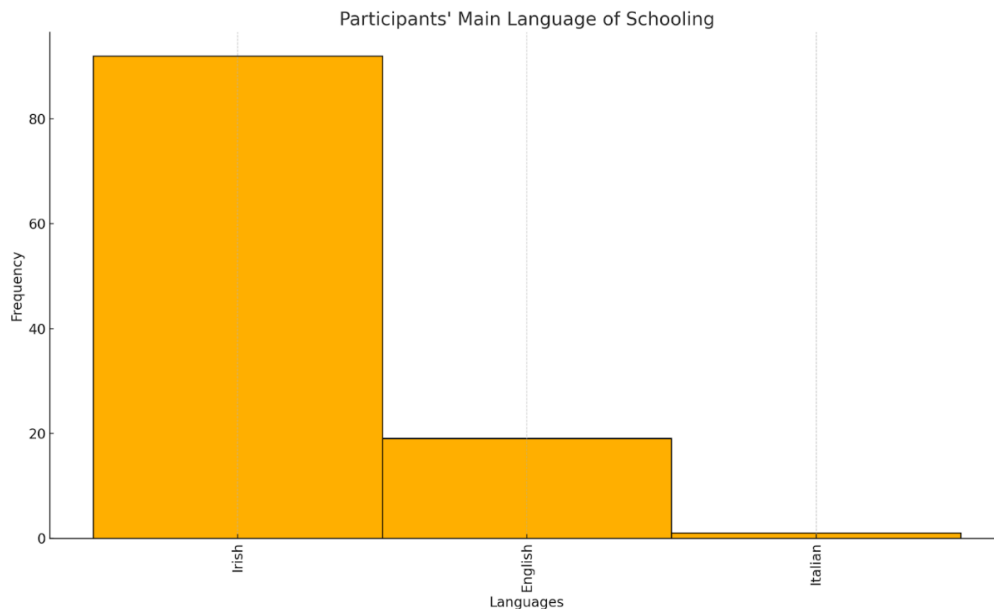
1.4. Participants' CLIL learning experience

As was observed in the previous section with regards to participants' main language of schooling, the vast majority chose Irish as their main CLIL language with a few (*N*=8) choosing English. While this may be a misunderstanding, given that some students also chose English as their main language of schooling, this perhaps suggests that some students in this context do receive a proportion of the learning through English. For example, students who are considered to have English as an Additional Language (EAL) may receive more instruction through English than Irish to develop their English competence. In Ireland, there is state funding provided to support EAL learners, but not Irish as an Additional Language learners.

Main CLIL Languages
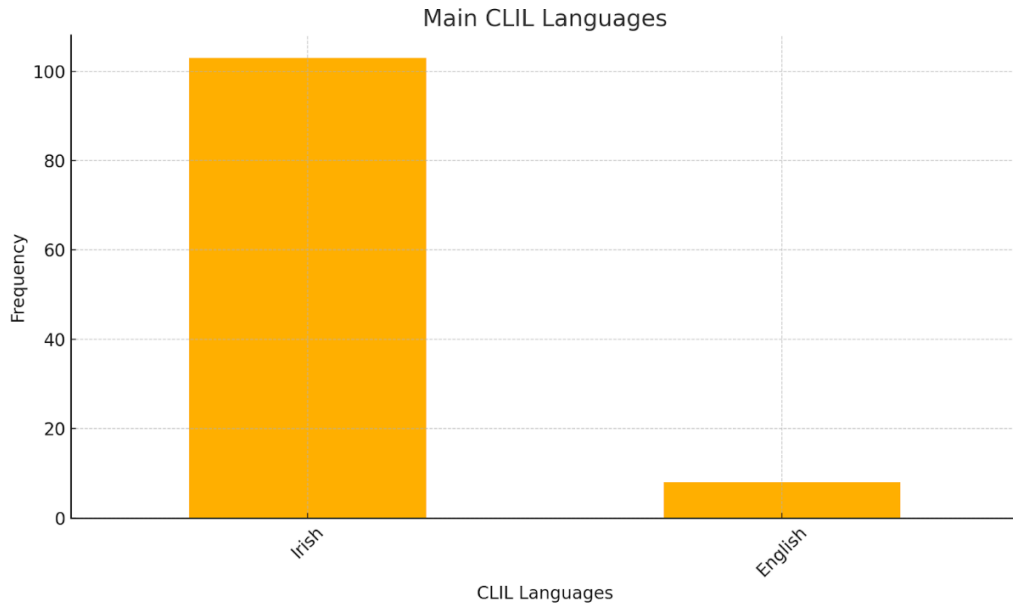
In terms of the **subjects taught** through Irish as the main **CLIL language**, given that learners are enrolled in IME, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of subjects were delivered through Irish. One observation that is interesting here is the fact that the vast majority of students choose Irish as the medium of instruction in languages. In IME, learners will learn English Language/Literature through the medium of English. Moreover, foreign languages (French, Spanish, German, Italian) are often learnt through the foreign language. However, it seems that participants here did consider, in the vast majority of cases, that Irish was used to teach most subjects. The subject with the highest level of English language content is Sports, which would include Physical Education.

Subjects Taught Through English and Irish
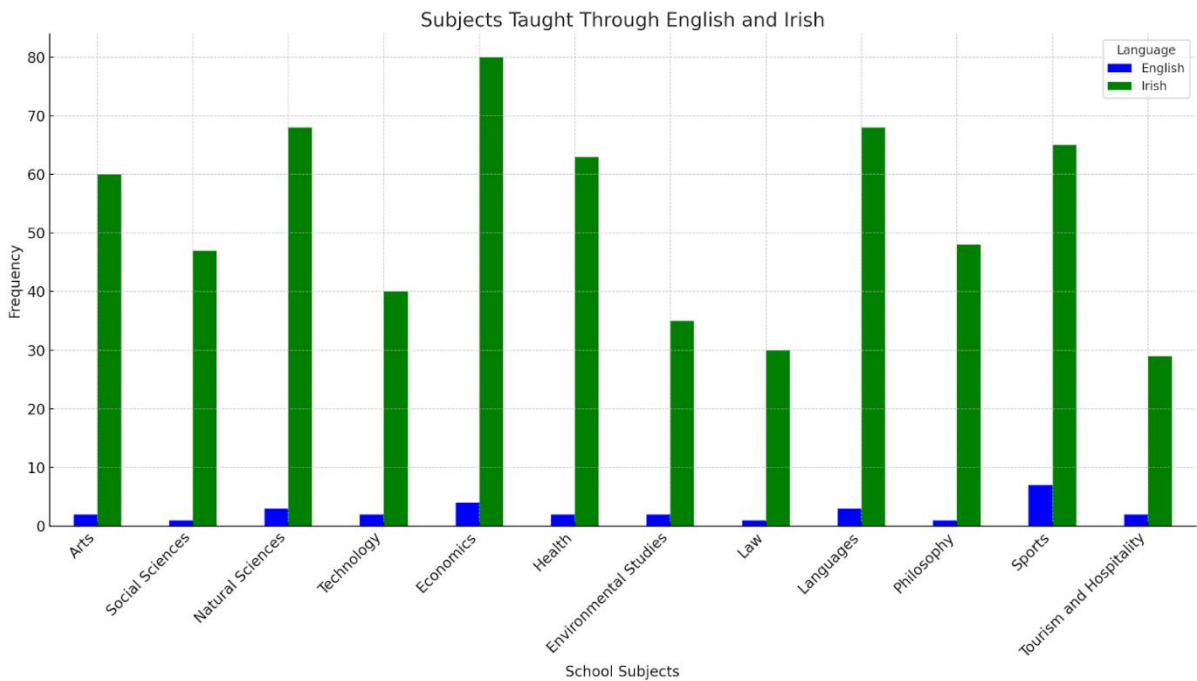
In terms of participants' perceptions of the **purpose of their CLIL learning** in IME, the vast majority of learners provided a large range of responses varying from solely focused on language learning to solely focused on learning the content. However, the interquartile range is skewed more towards learning of content with the median sitting at 76, suggesting that most participants saw that the purpose of CLIL learning in IME was a mixture of learning language and content, or predominantly content.
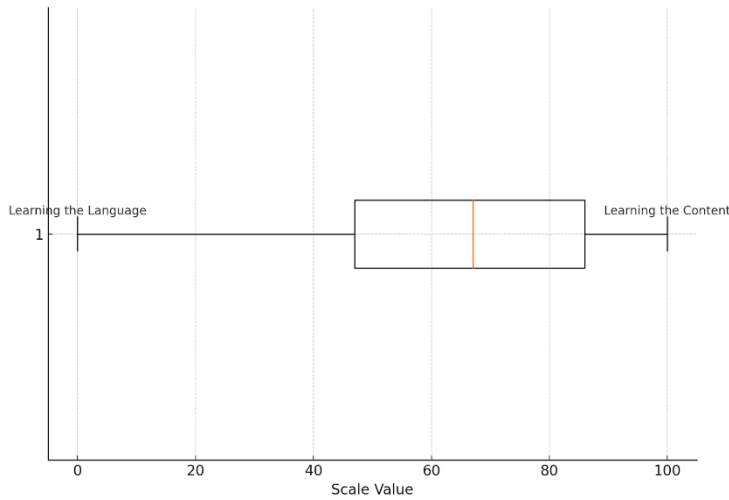
In terms of the **multilingual nature of CLIL classrooms** in IME, the interquartile range is skewed much more considerably to the right in favour of multilingual, with a median of 80. This suggests that although the focus of IME as on the acquisition of Irish as the main language of schooling and CLIL, learners felt that CLIL classrooms were multilingual. This is unsurprising given the wide range of languages that are spoken were home languages or heritage languages by participants.
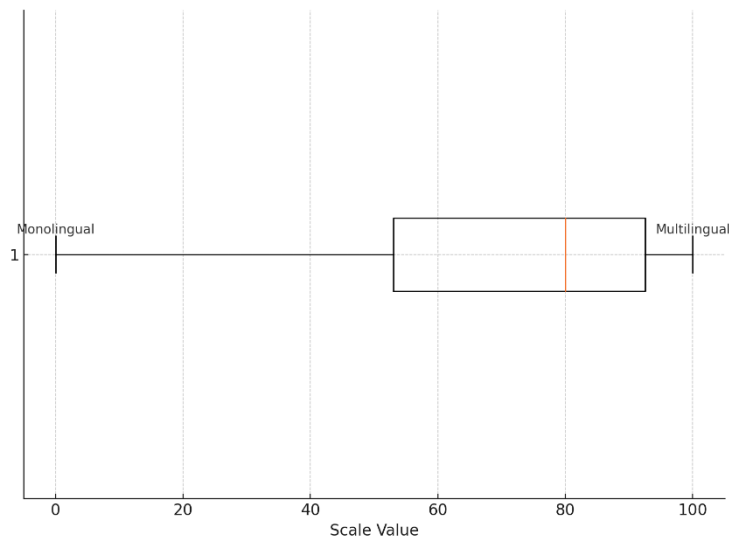
Overall, therefore, participants felt that the focus of learning in IME was principally content AND language, or MAINLY content but that this occurred in a decidedly multilingual context. This has important implications perhaps for the acquisition of bi/multilingual disciplinary literacies given that the CLIL contexts are perceived to be multilingual in nature.

1.5. Focus on spare time

When it comes to the **importance that participants' placed on their daily extramural digital practices** and how it supported their CLIL learning, those practices that were 'important' were virtual reality, online forums, paid educational apps, and e-book readers. On the other hand, activities that were considered 'moderately important' were multiplayer gaming, online research, free educational apps, digital projectors, and online shopping. If those activities that were' important' or 'moderately important' are combined, it is clear that in the Irish context, online research, online shopping, e-book readers, and multiplayer gaming were the most important in terms of their daily practices. The use of e-book readers is unsurprising given the proliferation of paperless textbooks. The use of online research is also equally expected. However, the role of online shopping and multiplayer gaming is more unusual. This perhaps requires further research to see how they support CLIL learning in school. What is also interesting is that, given the prevalence of social media and messaging in the lifeworlds of young people, relatively little importance is attached to these in terms of the role that they play in supporting CLIL learning in Irish. In fact, in terms of social media, a proportion of participants actually did not attach any specific importance to it at all. A final observation is that of AI, which currently plays a rather insignificant role in terms of supporting learners with their CLIL learning in Ireland.

Importance of Spare Time Activities for CLIL (Daily)
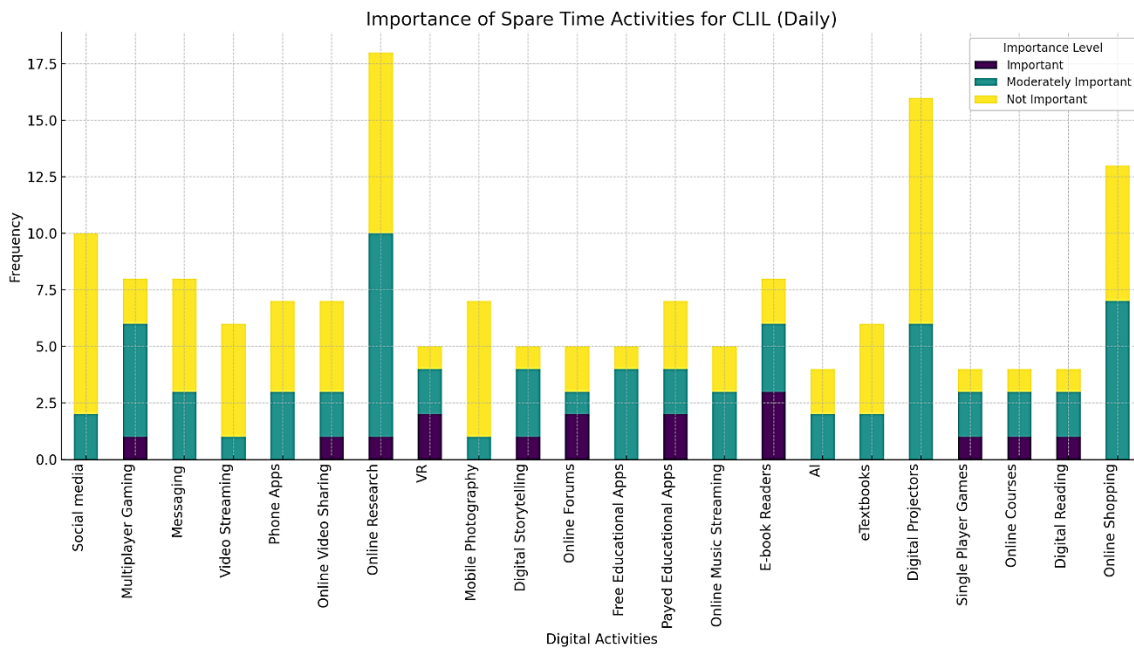
	Important	Moderately important	Not important	Unknown
Social media	0	2	8	102
Multiplayer gaming	0	1	6	105
Messaging	1	3	1	107
Video streaming	2	1	2	107
Phone apps	0	4	1	107
Online video sharing	2	2	3	105
Online research	0	3	2	107
VR	3	3	2	104
Online shopping 1	0	6	5	108
Mobile photography	0	2	4	106
Digital storytelling	0	6	10	96
Online forums	1	5	2	104
Free educational apps	1	2	1	108
Paid educational apps	1	2	1	108
Online music streaming	1	2	1	108
E-book readers	0	3	3	106
AI	0	3	5	104
E-textbooks	0	1	5	106
Digital projectors	0	3	4	105
Single player games	1	2	4	105
Online courses	1	9	8	94
Digital reading	2	2	1	107

Comparing participants' daily extramural activities with those that they perform weekly and their importance in terms of supporting their CLIL learning, it is clear that less importance is attached to the use of digital practice on a weekly basis, suggesting that digital practices do, in fact, form an integral part of their daily lives. Nonetheless, online research still plays a very important role in supporting learners with their CLIL learning. Also, e-textbooks, digital projectors, and free educational apps play an important role, but the use of gaming and online shopping is less important over the span of a week.

Importance of Spare Time Activities for CLIL (Weekly)
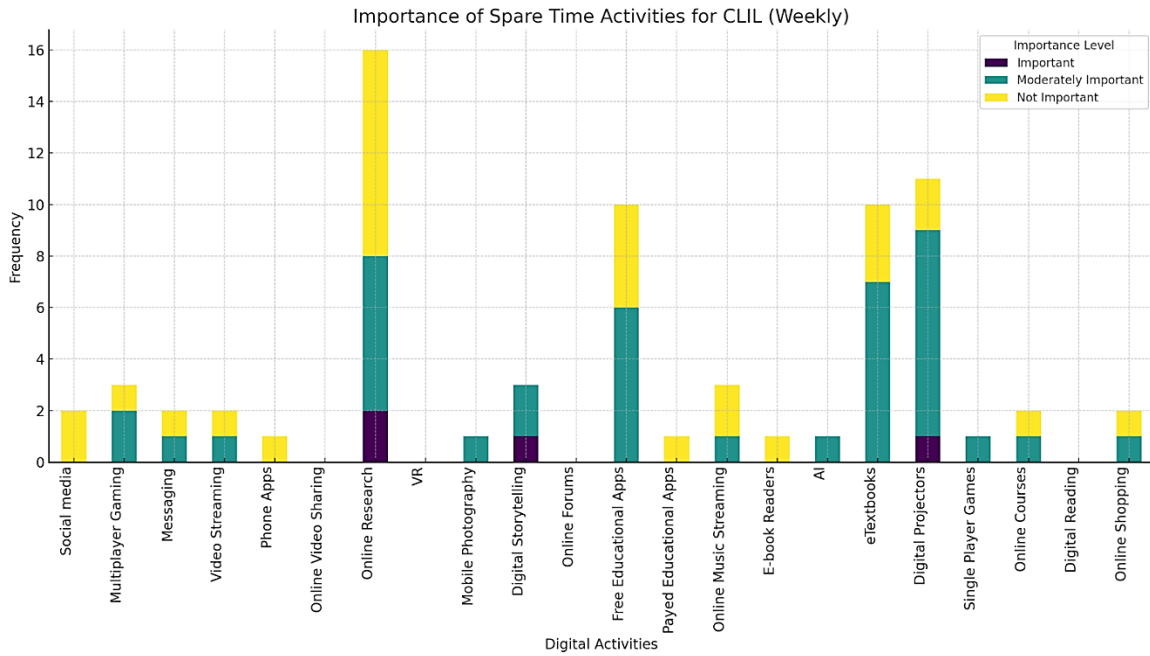
	Important	Moderately important	Not important	Unknown
Social media	0	0	2	110
Multiplayer gaming	0	1	0	111
Messaging	1	2	0	109
Video streaming	0	0	0	112
Phone apps	0	6	4	102
Online video sharing	0	0	1	111
Online research	0	1	2	109
VR	0	0	1	111
Online shopping 1	0	1	1	111
Mobile photography	0	7	3	102
Digital storytelling	1	8	2	101
Online forums	0	2	1	109
Free educational apps	0	1	0	111
Paid educational apps	0	1	1	110
Online music streaming	0	0	0	112
E-book readers	0	1	0	111
AI	0	1	1	110
E-textbooks	0	1	1	110
Digital projectors	0	0	1	111
Single player games	0	0	0	112
Online courses	2	6	8	96
Digital reading	0	0	0	112

# 1.6. Access to digital devices in and out of school

In terms of participants' **access to the internet** in and out of school, it is perhaps unsurprising that access to the internet occurred most frequently in the home, in relatives' homes, or in their friends' homes. 'My own bedroom' is the place extramurally where internet access occurred the least. Another observation is that participants appeared to access the internet everywhere relatively frequently reflecting the prevalence of being connected and online their lifeworlds perhaps through their mobile devices. A final observation is that participants accessed the internet more frequently extramurally than they did at school. This is a curious observation given the importance of online research as outlined above. This suggests that the use of the internet is something that occurs outside of the school walls.

Internet Access by Location and Frequency
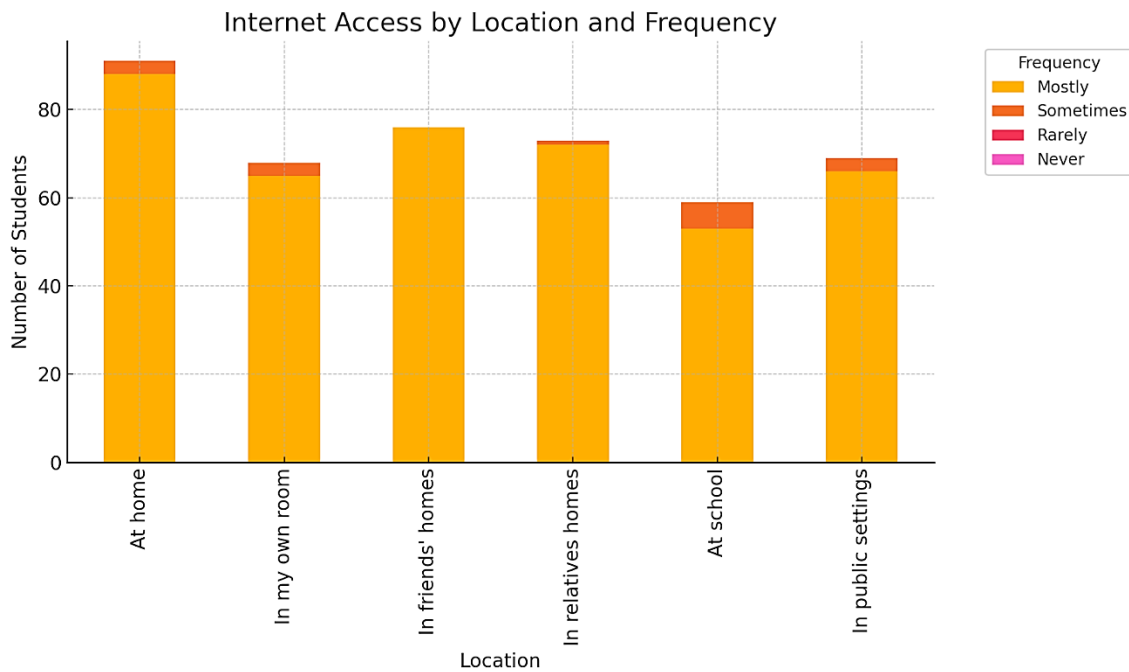
| Location	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
At home	88	3	0	0
In my own room	65	3	0	0
In friends' homes	76	0	0	0
In relatives homes	72	1	0	0
At school	53	6	0	0
In public settings	66	3	0	0

In terms of the **digital devices that participants' used extramurally** it is also unsurprising that mobile phones were by and large the most commonly and frequently used digital device outside of school. What is more surprising is that smart home technologies such as televisions featured digital devices that were always used. With regards to the use of computer-based technologies, games consoles were used most followed by tablets, laptops, and desktops. This ordering is perhaps predictable given the prevalence of mobile phone technology that often emulates that of tablets, and the importance that is placed on mobile technologies over those that are more static (i.e., desktop computers). This preference for mobile technologies perhaps also reflects internet usage which is prevalent in all contexts. In order for internet access to be so widespread, the technologies used in these contexts are likely to be more mobile as a result.

Frequency of Digital Devices Extramural Usage
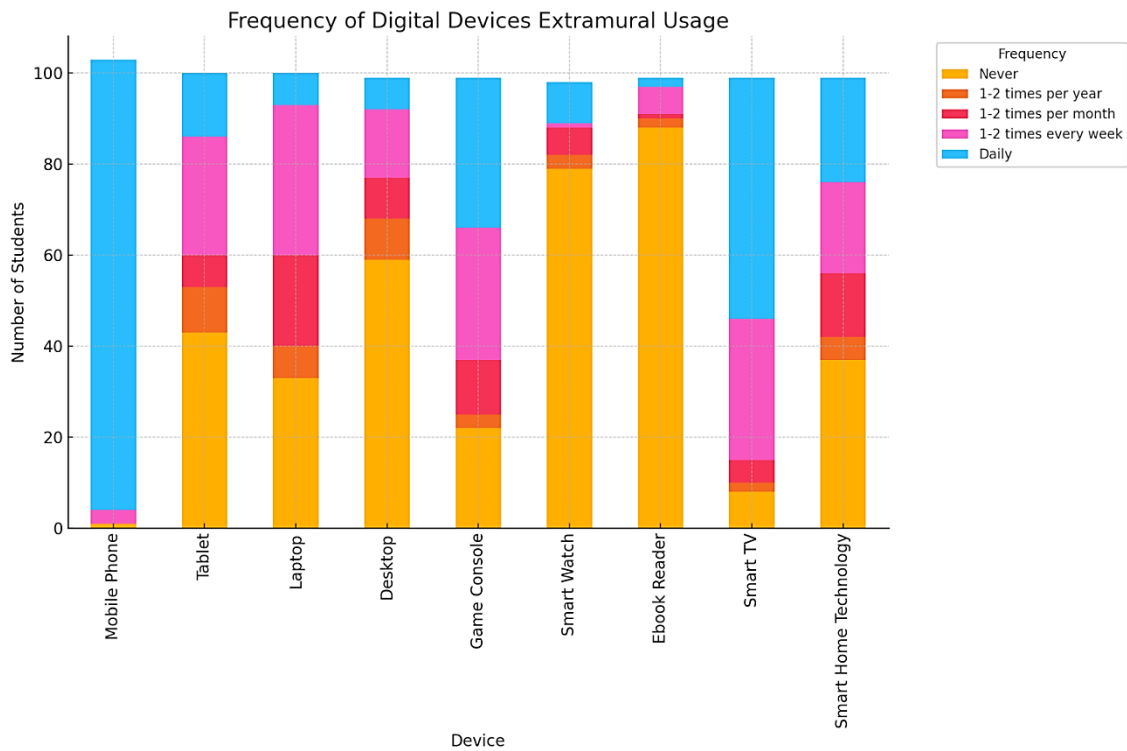
Device	Never	1-2 times per year	1-2 times per month	1-2 times per week	Daily
Mobile phone	1	0	0	3	99
Tablet	43	10	7	26	14
Laptop	33	7	20	33	7
Desktop	59	9	9	15	7
Game console	22	3	12	29	33
Smart watch	79	3	6	1	9
E-book reader	88	2	1	6	2
Smart TV	8	2	5	31	53
Smart home technology	37	5	14	20	23

When it comes to the **use of digital devices in school**, what is surprising is that the use of technologies featured very little in comparison to the usage of technology extramurally. Once again, the use of the mobile phone was frequent in the school context, given its availability and students' familiarity with its functionality. One interesting difference here is that tablets are more likely to be used on a daily basis, but laptop computers are more prevalent over a week period by a larger margin. This suggests that there is perhaps a mismatch between the use of technologies for some learners between school and home in terms of what they have access to. Also, the use of smart technologies in the home is something that does not feature in the school environment.
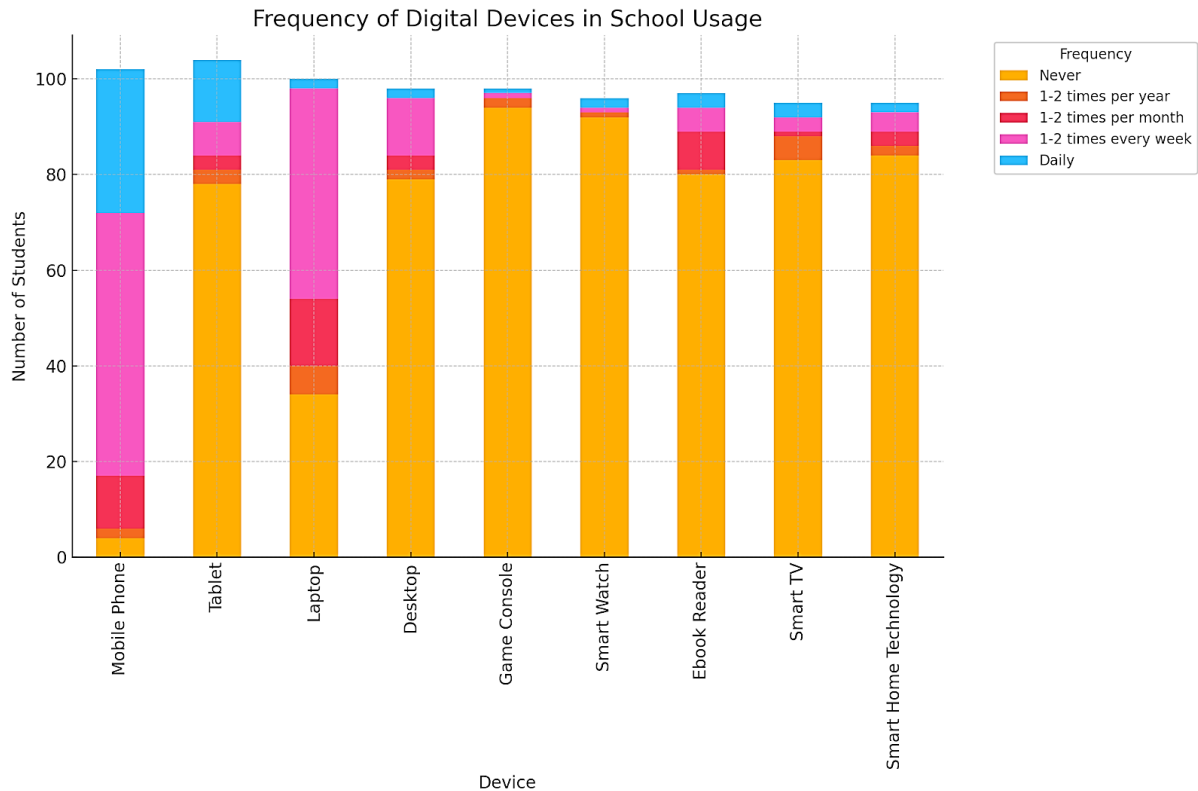

| Device	Never	1-2 times per year	1-2 times per month	1-2 times per week	Daily
Mobile phone	4	2	11	55	30
Tablet	78	3	3	7	13
Laptop	34	6	14	44	2
Desktop	79	2	3	12	2
Game console	94	2	0	1	1
Smart watch	92	1	0	1	2
E-book reader	80	1	8	5	3
Smart TV	83	5	1	3	3
Smart home technology	84	2	3	4	2

1.7. Challenges when using digital technologies

The **challenges that participants have with digital technologies** did vary in some cases in terms of frequency, but specific cases such as 'access to the internet' and 'school policy' featured prominently as issues that needed to be overcome in order to use technologies in school contexts. For a small number of students, a prominent issue was access to such technologies, suggesting that there was potentially a digital divide between those that could access certain technologies and those that could not. This was also backed up by the fact that access to technology extramurally was also 'never' a problem for some participants.

This was perhaps also reinforced by the perception of digital skills being an enabling or inhibiting factor for access to digital tools. Here, 5 respondents said that their digital skills were sometimes a problem, whereas 5 said that it was not a factor. Access to digital technologies was also not inhibited by parents but it was sometimes inhibited by teachers. The more limited use of technology in schools perhaps reinforces the idea that teachers are gatekeepers of such technology in comparison to parents who appear to give learners much more freedom in terms of access.

Overall, therefore, the use of digital technologies was something more prominent extramurally than within the school. A key question in the Irish and IME context is whether this lack of use is motivated by the lack of access to Irish-medium technologies and digital tools or by other wider factors related to the lack of facilities and access in school or the lack of facilitation on the part of the teachers given that they are perceived sometimes as an issue when accessing technologies, a fact that might be reinforced by school policies.

Problems with Digital Technologies (sometimes)

Problems with Digital Technologies (never)
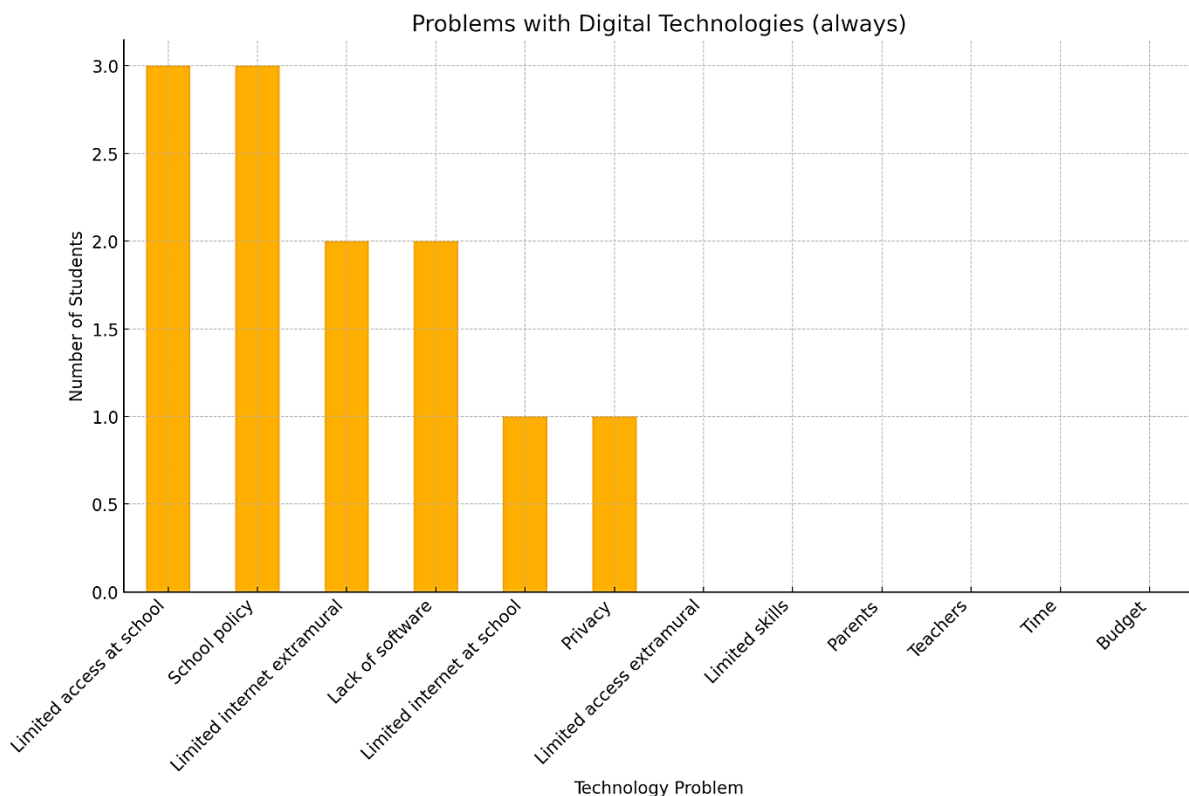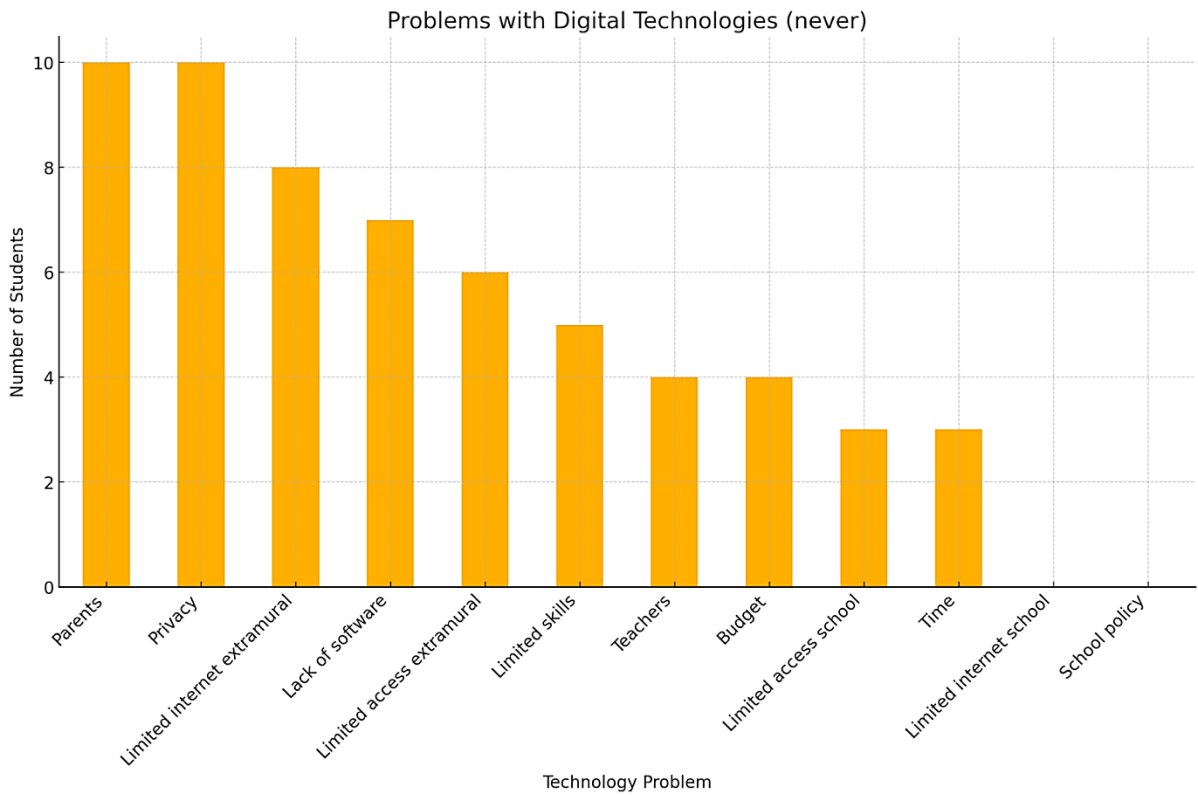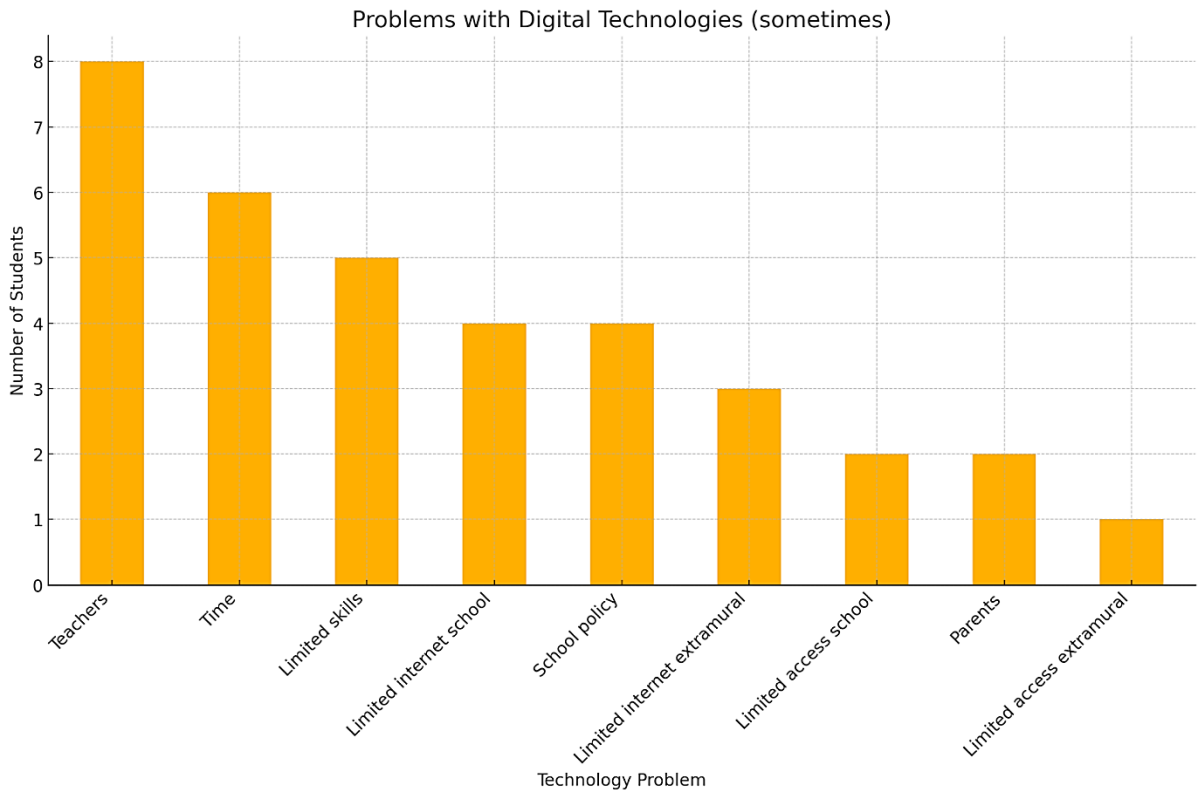
2. Digital Literacies Teacher Survey (DLTS): Éire/Ireland

2.1. Introduction

The DLTS survey was administered in Ireland from March-May 2024. Primarily, the survey was shared via email to colleagues shared by both survey administrators. It was also shared and distributed by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) to their Irish-medium post-primary schools, and this link with ETBI aimed to also engage An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and their social media pages. ETBs provide education in primary, post-primary, further education & training, and youth services. The main objective of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is the advancement of education and training, and to promote the development of education, training and youth work in Ireland. COGG is the primary body set up as a result of the Education Act 1998 and is responsible for supporting all schools in the Gaeltacht (Irish Speaking Areas) and those that teach through the medium of Gaeilge (Irish). The organisation has strong links to the teaching community that it represents across Ireland, supporting the activism that is essential for the survival of Gaeilge as a language of schooling to promote additive bilingualism.

The survey was shared to schools that are in the Gaeltacht or that teach through the medium of Gaeilge. Participants were contacted via email. An email explanation was provided to accompany the survey because CLIL as a pedagogical and theoretical construct is not well known in Ireland, despite the fact that it has a very long tradition stretching back to the founding of the state in the early 1920s.

Despite the usual activism on behalf of the teachers of Irish-medium settings, there was very little uptake of the survey with only two full responses being collected. We feel that this was potentially due to the fact that the questionnaire was shared with teachers at an important time of year when they are preparing their students for state examinations. Also, we feel that perhaps the understanding of CLIL and how this relates to Irish-medium Education was perhaps lost. This is unfortunate given that the context of teaching through Gaeilge is not well known beyond the island of Ireland, despite its long history which even predates the first conceptualisations of CLIL.

The history of content and language integrated learning can be traced back to just before the foundation of the Irish State in 1922 when the first Gaelscoil (Irish-medium Primary School) was established in 1917 by a group of nationalists. However, it was not until the 1970s when significant momentum spurred by the growing cultural nationalism and public demand for Irish language education, that Irish medium schools began to flourish. 66,979 learners (7%) between the ages of 5 and 18 receive their schooling through the medium of Irish. However, Gaeilge is a minorised language, which coexists in the same context as English. As a result, teaching through Irish encompasses significant challenges, including: the availability of designed teaching resources and methods in Irish or that are devised from Irish rather than

English; the prevalence of English outside of the classroom in the lifeworlds of young people; and the lack of normalised usage outside of the school setting, to name but a few reasons. Nonetheless, the number of Irish-medium schools continues to rise, and the Department of Education is currently exploring the possibility of introducing the teaching of some disciplinary areas through Irish in English-medium primary schools such as Art and PE.

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