

C1 Advanced in Estonia: Impact evaluation report

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Executive summary

Since 2019, graduating students in Estonia have had the opportunity to apply to take the Cambridge English C1 Advanced as a school-leaving English language exam. This report contains an evaluation of the impact of introducing the C1 Advanced into the education system in Estonia. Areas of research include student and teacher perceptions of, and attitudes to, the test; impact on teaching and learning; and how the C1 Advanced qualification has been used by candidates after leaving school.

In order to carry out the evaluation, a Theory of Change was developed, with corresponding research questions. Using these, data collection instruments were created and both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from key stakeholders (students, teachers, parents/guardians, former students) through questionnaires, interviews and lesson observations.

Key findings were:

- The C1 Advanced exam provides students with extra motivation to achieve a higher level of English (C1/C2) principally because of the exchange value of the certificate, which can open doors to work and study opportunities both locally and abroad.
- The influence of the C1 Advanced exam on teaching was considered positive by teachers. It encourages them to challenge students to achieve a C1/C2 level through an appropriate range of high-level communicative activities. Having said that, some teachers felt that the challenge of the exam meant that the curriculum had narrowed.
- Teachers felt that students' communication skills in English had improved as a result of studying for the C1 Advanced. The exam's requirements have led teachers to focus more on paired-speaking activities, higher-level vocabulary and learning to write more formally.
- Since the introduction of the C1 Advanced as a school leaving exam, the number of students graduating with a C1/C2 certificate in Estonia has increased considerably. In addition, the percentage of students achieving C1/C2 has risen, which, along with the increase in candidature, suggests that the English language level among the student population is improving.
- Former students who had taken the C1 Advanced in previous years reported a range of actual uses including studying or working both locally and abroad.

Finally, some suggestions for improvements were made based on the findings, including training for teachers around monitoring and feedback, teaching reading skills and adapting learning material. It was also recommended that, to increase the utility of the qualification, more formal recognition should be sought from higher education institutions and employers, and that this should then be communicated to key stakeholders – students, parents/guardians and teachers.

Introduction

Since 2019, graduating students in Estonia have had the opportunity to apply to take the Cambridge English C1 Advanced as a school-leaving English language exam. Prospective candidates first take the Cambridge English Placement Test, a short online test, and if they achieve an appropriate result, are then given the option of taking the C1 Advanced. Those students who do not qualify for the C1 Advanced sit the Estonian national English exam which reports up to a B2 level on the Common European Framework or Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The introduction of the C1 Advanced exam into the Estonian education system is aligned to the Republic of Estonia's goal of promoting the academic mobility of Estonian residents (see 'Strategic Goal 1' in the National Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, 2021)).

Given the importance of the exam, Cambridge English has worked together with Harno (Education and Youth Board), a government agency of the Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia, to carry out an evaluation of the impact of introducing the C1 Advanced. Areas of research include student and teacher perceptions of, and attitudes to, the test; impact on teaching and learning; and how the C1 Advanced qualification has been used by candidates after leaving school.

Characteristics of C1 Advanced

All Cambridge English Qualifications are aligned to the CEFR, the international standard in measuring language ability (see [here](#) for more details). Extensive research and validation ensure that each exam and each grade represent the same level of English no matter where or when the exams are taken.

In C1 Advanced (and almost all other Cambridge English Qualifications), students receive a Cambridge English Scale score for each skill (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) and Use of English. A candidate's overall score is calculated by adding all of the individual scores together and dividing by five. A candidate's grade and CEFR level are therefore based on their performance across the whole test, and there is no requirement to achieve a minimum score in each paper.

Writing and Speaking components

Writing and Speaking components are marked by trained, standardised examiners according to a set of analytic scales, covering a range of assessment criteria. The assessment criteria are linked to the CEFR.

Reading, Listening and Use of English components

Reading, Listening and Use of English components contain a series of items which are marked as either correct or incorrect. Cambridge English uses Rasch analysis to ensure that a consistent standard is applied in the grading of these objectively marked components, accounting for differences in difficulty between them. By a process of standard setting, these defined ability levels are linked to CEFR thresholds, meaning that the same process of mapping scores to CEFR levels can take place as with the Writing and Speaking components.

Research Design and Method

This evaluation study has been designed using a theory-based approach which seeks to investigate impact by exploring the “causal chains thought to bring about change” (HM Treasury, 2020, p.43). This approach is realised through a focus on beneficiary assessment, which means that researchers gather information on outcomes as experienced by the principal stakeholders – in this case learners, teachers and parents/guardians. The purpose of this is to place the intended beneficiaries at the centre of the evaluation by assessing the value of the project through how it affects their lives (Salem, 2002).

A Theory of Change with concomitant research questions was therefore developed with reference to the Cambridge English Impact Framework¹. The Framework outlines domains, and areas within those domains, which are a focus of interest for Cambridge English impact evaluation studies. In this case, evaluation touched on all three domains: teaching, learning and assessment, and looked at various areas within those such as motivation, confidence and language proficiency.

Data collection was conceived through a mixed methods research design (MMRD). This is so called as both quantitative and qualitative methods of gathering information are used to provide data. Gathering different types of data using an MMRD allows a broader perspective on the area of study, compensating for the weaknesses of each form of data on their own, and can increase understanding of specific areas of interest by integrating both qualitative and quantitative data in the final analysis (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, this study used a Convergent Parallel MMRD, in which both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered at approximately the same time, analysed separately, and then compared side by side with the research questions in mind.

¹ See here for more detail: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/why-choose-us/impact-monitoring-and-evaluation/impact-framework/>

RESEARCH SAMPLE

For pragmatic reasons, purposive sampling (Galloway, 2005) was used to select participants for this study. Several variables were taken into account when choosing participants in order to make the sample as representative as possible in the circumstances, specifically: type of school attended/taught in, type of area school is located in, and predominant first language of students. As much as possible given the circumstances, the sample was then drawn from schools which represented categories within these three variables:

Table 1: Sampling variables

Type of school	New State Gymnasium	Traditional Gymnasium	Vocational	Private
Type of area	Urban	Rural	—	—
Predominant first language	Estonian	Russian	—	—

All of the categories in Table 1 apart from vocational schools² were represented in responses to the questionnaires from students, teachers, parents and former students. In the focus groups that were subsequently carried out, both Gymnasium types were represented as were urban and rural schools, including one with a significant minority of Russian speakers.

² Two vocational schools were contacted but neither chose to participate in the study.

THEORY OF CHANGE

A hypothesised Theory of Change was developed for the project:

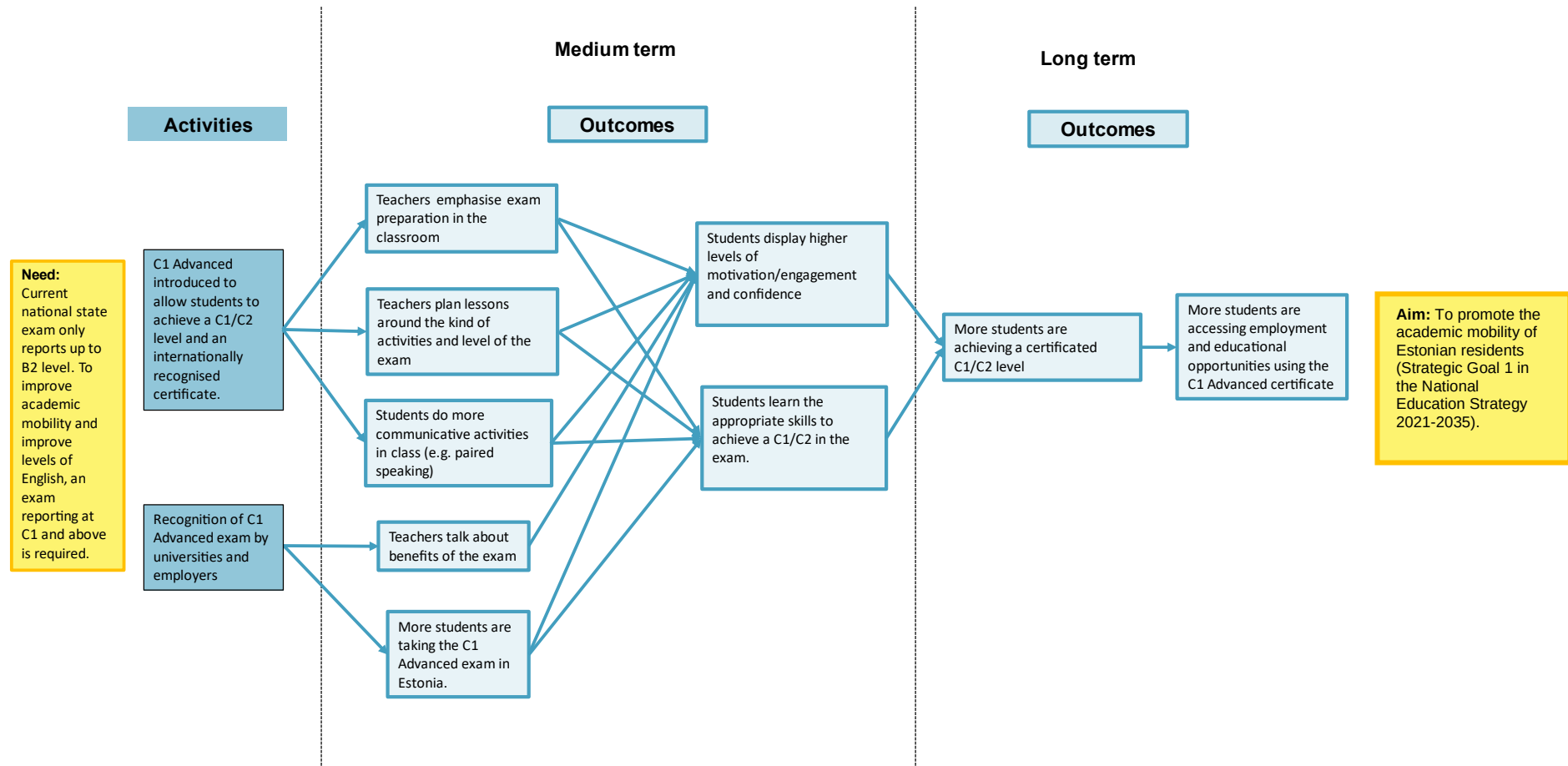


Figure 1: Theory of Change

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Theory of Change generated the following research questions (RQs):

Table 2: Research questions

To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonia education system...	
RQ1	...led to increased motivation/engagement among English students?
RQ2	...led to improved English teaching practices, e.g. focus on communication, less teacher-centred lessons?
RQ3	...led to improved English communication skills for students?
RQ4	...led to more students achieving a C1 or above English level on graduation?
RQ5	...improved academic and employment opportunities for those who achieved a C1 or above English level?

The data collected for this research will answer the above RQs with the exception of RQ4, which will be answered using existing data on exam performance in Estonia.

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Quantitative data were gathered by means of four questionnaires – one for each group (students, teachers, parents and former students). Both nominal data, e.g. school attended, and ordinal data (answers were captured on a series of Likert scales), were collected. Questions were adapted from the Cambridge English Impact Toolkit, which is a bank of questions used to standardise surveys across projects. The adaptation process was carried out by Cambridge English researchers with input from Harno colleagues in Estonia, who understand the local context. The questions were designed to elicit information to answer the research questions outlined in the previous section.

The questionnaires were administered using the online platform SurveyMonkey in 2023. Data were then downloaded from the platform and analysed.

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Qualitative data were collected through open questions in each of the questionnaires and by means of a series of focus groups and interviews with teachers, and current and former students. The majority of these were carried on in situ in Estonia. Interviews with former students were carried out via Microsoft Teams. All focus groups were conducted in English. Focus groups with teachers and students lasted for approximately an hour and interviews with former students around fifteen minutes. Each followed a loose script with a number of questions designed to elicit further data in the areas under investigation and were audio recorded. Transcripts of each focus group and interview were generated, and then summarised using Microsoft Copilot. Summaries were then reviewed against transcripts and themes picked out.

Qualitative data were also collected through lesson observations. A total of six lessons were observed in four different schools. These were evaluated bearing in mind the areas of focus of the study.

DATA PROTECTION AND CONSENT PROCESSES

Cambridge English has a robust process of ethical vetting and approval for all research. Informed consent was collected from all participants in this study.

The data that Cambridge English collects from any of its research activities is stored and analysed in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act (2018) and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and any subsequent legislation, and destroyed when no longer required for the research.

For this study, all participants were over the age of 16 and it was made clear to them that the data gathered from both the surveys and the focus groups/interviews would be anonymous. For the questionnaires, no names or other identifying information were gathered. For the focus groups, the transcripts were anonymised and the original recordings deleted. It was also made explicit to participants that they could opt out of the research study at any time during the process until the data that they provided was anonymised, at which point it became impossible to separate it from the data provided by other participants.

Results

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Students

Answers to the questionnaire came from students at twenty different schools from across Estonia (n=461). Respondents were predominantly female (54%) and almost all were 17–19 years old (97%), with the largest group being 18 (73%). 89% of them spoke Estonian at home, compared with 15% who spoke Russian (it was possible for respondents to give more than one home language).

Former students

Students who had taken the C1 Advanced previously also came from across Estonia (n=189). They were predominantly female (63%) and 82% of them were aged between 19 and 21 (48% were 19). 81% spoke Estonian at home, compared with 22% who spoke Russian – again, it was possible to give more than one home language.

Teachers

Similarly to the groups above, teachers who responded to the questionnaire worked at schools across the country (n=40). They were generally very experienced and well qualified for their roles: over 60% had a higher-level qualification such as a Master's degree or doctorate, 88% had been teaching for 11 years or more, and 98% reported having a C1 level of English or above. 90% of them were female.

Parents/guardians

As in the other groups, parents/guardians came from across the country (n=118). Most were female (85%) and 78% spoke Estonian at home, in comparison to 21% who spoke Russian. Parents were also asked about their English proficiency: 93% of those surveyed could speak some English and 52% said they spoke English well.

OVERVIEW OF ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ESTONIA

Data were gathered in the questionnaires with a view to better understanding the current teaching and learning situation in Estonia. Data collected include use of English as a medium of instruction in the classroom, language skills and systems taught, interaction patterns in the lessons, and teacher and student motivation and attitude to teaching and learning.

Makeup of English lessons

Responses suggested that teachers do a range of activities during most lessons. However, there were some activities that were more common than others. For example, there was a strong focus on vocabulary teaching (97% of teachers said that they taught vocabulary in most or every lesson). This was also true for speaking (again, 97% of teachers said that they did speaking activities in most or every lesson). However, some activities appear to occupy significantly less lesson time. For example, exam practice tasks are done in most or every lesson by 46% of teachers and for writing texts in English, it was only 13%.

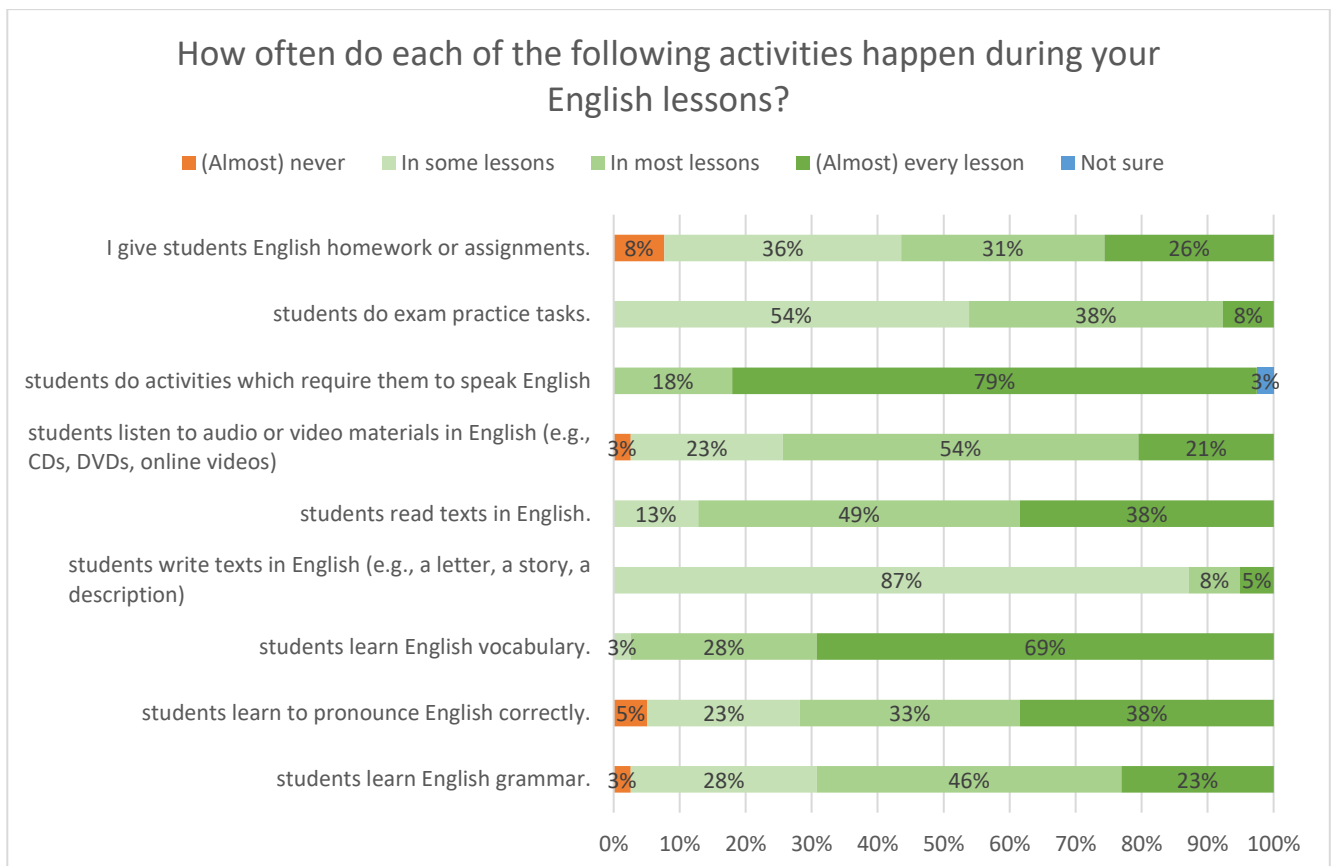


Figure 2: Frequency of activities in English lessons as reported by teachers

Regarding interaction patterns in class, 80% of teachers reported that students did tasks in pairs or groups for some or most of the lesson. In contrast, 67% said that they spoke to the whole class to explain something or give instructions for some or most of the lesson, and 77% said that they asked questions of the whole class for some or most of the lesson. This suggests that class time is split fairly evenly between teacher-class and student-student communication. This is more or less in line with student perceptions: 40% said that they worked in pairs or groups for half the lesson or more, with only 12% saying that they did this almost never. This also reflects what was seen during the lesson observations in classrooms across Estonia. Lessons had a significant teacher-fronted part, although all lessons observed also included pair and group work. For example, one lesson focussed on a range of skills and systems, including Use of English (grammar, lexis), Listening and Speaking. The Use of English part was led by the teacher who went over some techniques for sentence transformations from the C1 Advanced exam. Students completed the practice activity individually and then the answers were checked in plenary. Later in the class, a Speaking activity was set up through a teacher-fronted explanation of new vocabulary for the topic and then students had the chance to discuss the topic in pairs or small groups.

Similarly, 59% of teachers said that they provide feedback on students' work in a whole-class group in some or most of the lesson, and 57% reported providing individual or small-group feedback in some or most of the lesson. This suggests that feedback is delivered frequently by most teachers both to the whole class and to individuals.

However, in this case, lesson observations suggested that this was not quite the whole truth. Teachers did give feedback in whole-class group frequently. However, feedback on pair work or group work was much less common, with some teachers choosing not to monitor these. There may have been reasons why this monitoring was not carried out (see Discussion section).

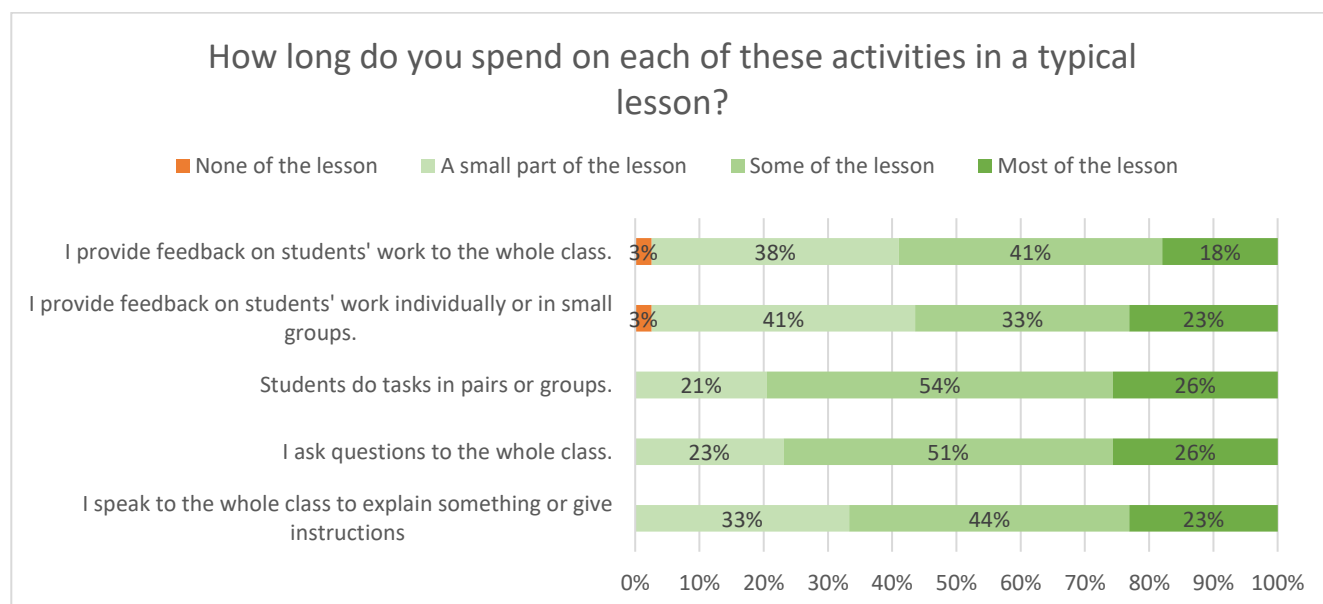


Figure 3: Interaction patterns in English lessons as reported by teachers

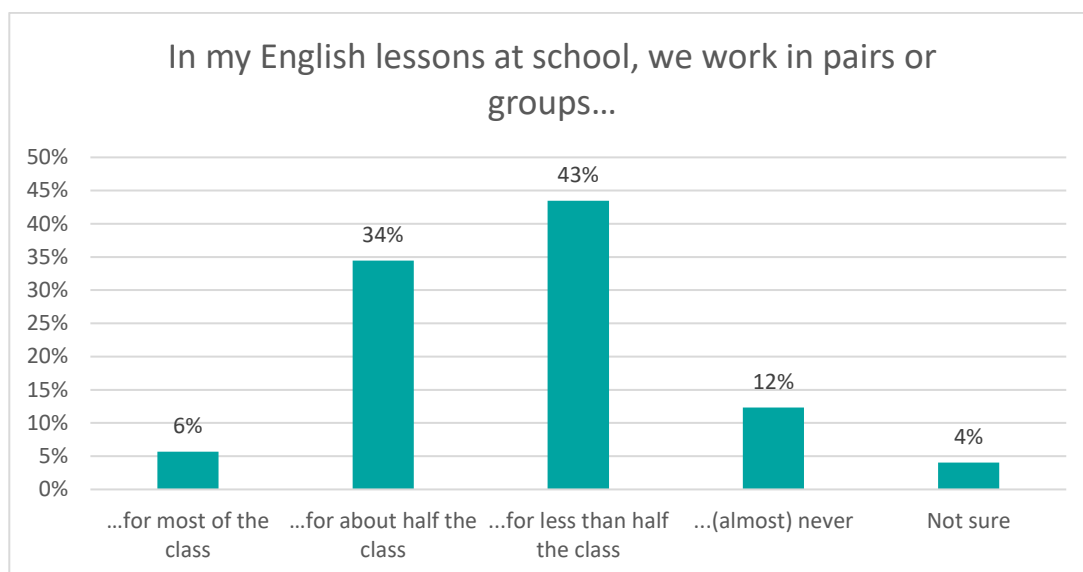


Figure 4: Student perception of amount of pair/groupwork in lessons

An important variable in learning English is exposure to the language. Therefore, teachers and students were asked questions about interactions in English in the language classroom. 92% of teachers surveyed reported that they used English almost always, and 77% said that students almost always spoke to them in English. Regarding student-student interaction, 79% of teachers reported that students spoke to each other in English often or almost always.

Figures were lower when reported by students: 74% of students said that the teacher almost always spoke to them in English, and only 50% said that when they spoke to the teacher, they almost always used English. When asked how often they spoke to their classmates in English 39% said that they often or almost always used English.

Although answers vary between teachers and students, overall, they suggest that English is the main language of instruction, and that the use of other languages is relatively limited in the classroom. This was also borne out by the lesson observations – teachers would use Estonian to clarify some areas of grammar or vocabulary but by and large conducted the class in English. Equally, students would answer teachers' questions in English almost all the time. However, interactions between students were more mixed in terms of language used. If carrying out a formal activity such as practising a part of the Speaking component of the exam, then students would almost always speak in English. In contrast, if the interactions were more informal, e.g. asking a classmate what page of the book they were on, the language used was usually Estonian.

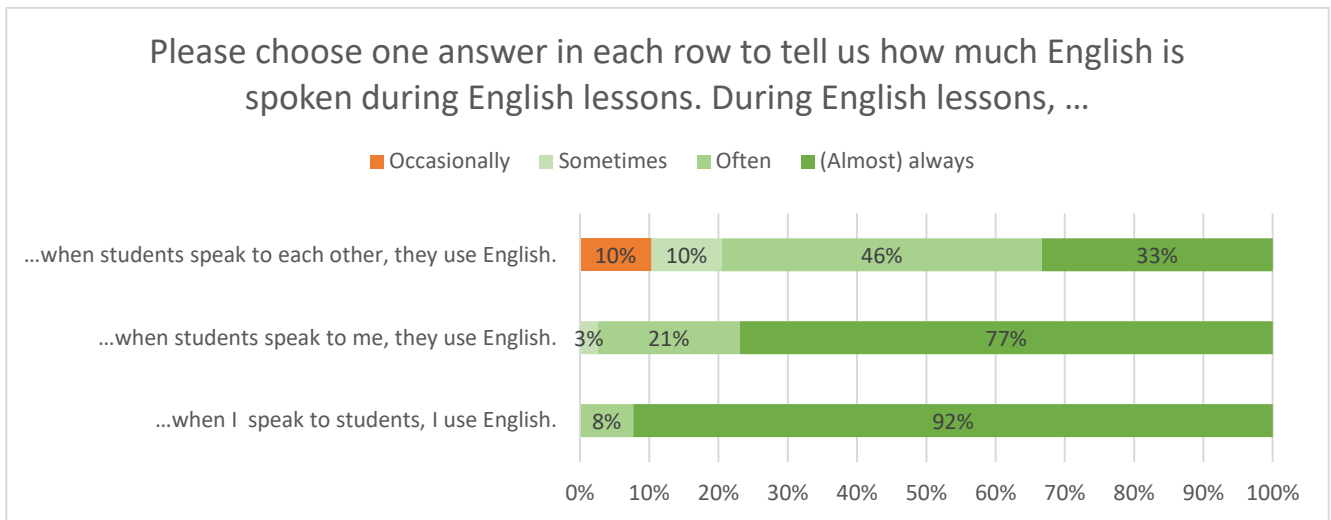


Figure 5: English use in the classroom as reported by teachers

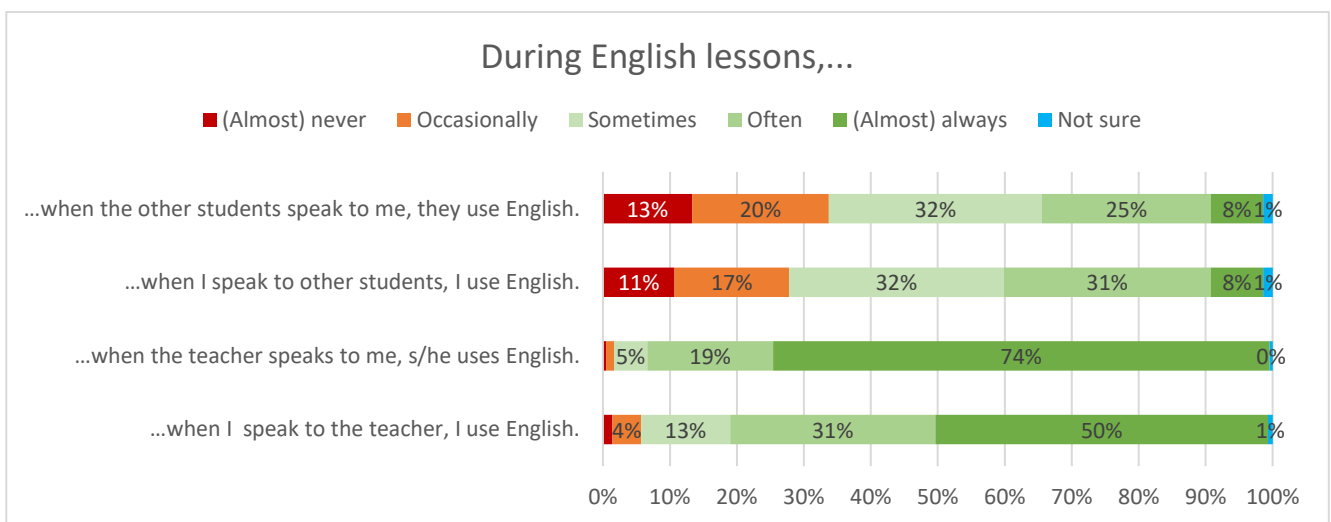


Figure 6: English use in the classroom as reported by students

Student motivation and attitude to learning English

Students were given some reasons why they might want to learn English and asked how important each was for them. The majority of the most popular reasons were what can be described as predominantly intrinsic motivations. For example, 98% of respondents said that it was important or very important for them to learn English to help them use the internet to get information. Other reasons that scored very highly were helping to talk to people who don't talk their mother tongue, making it easier to travel to other countries, and understanding English-language media, e.g. films, TV, computer games. The more extrinsic or instrumental motivations tended to score lower, e.g. 78% of respondents said studying English was important or very important for their further studies, and only 27% said that it was important or very important to study English to please their parents or guardians.

Focus groups revealed similar motivations to the questionnaire for learning English including travel, study and work abroad, and accessing media.

I know many of my friends and, as I would like to, like, study outside of Estonia, so the English usage with languages would be like very important. [Student Focus Group 2, Student 3]

Also, I would say that most of the media that we can consume is in English so if you want to like search anything up online then you can do it in English. Because in Estonian or in Estonia, we don't really have like a lot of options or info in our in our own language. So it's easier to do. [Student Focus Group 1, Student 4]

I am overall interested in learning English because it can be, it can really benefit me in the future if I want to move to another country, let's say for the USA, America, America or Australia and it's always usually a useful skill to have because everything on the Internet is basically in English. [Student Focus Group 4, Student 4]

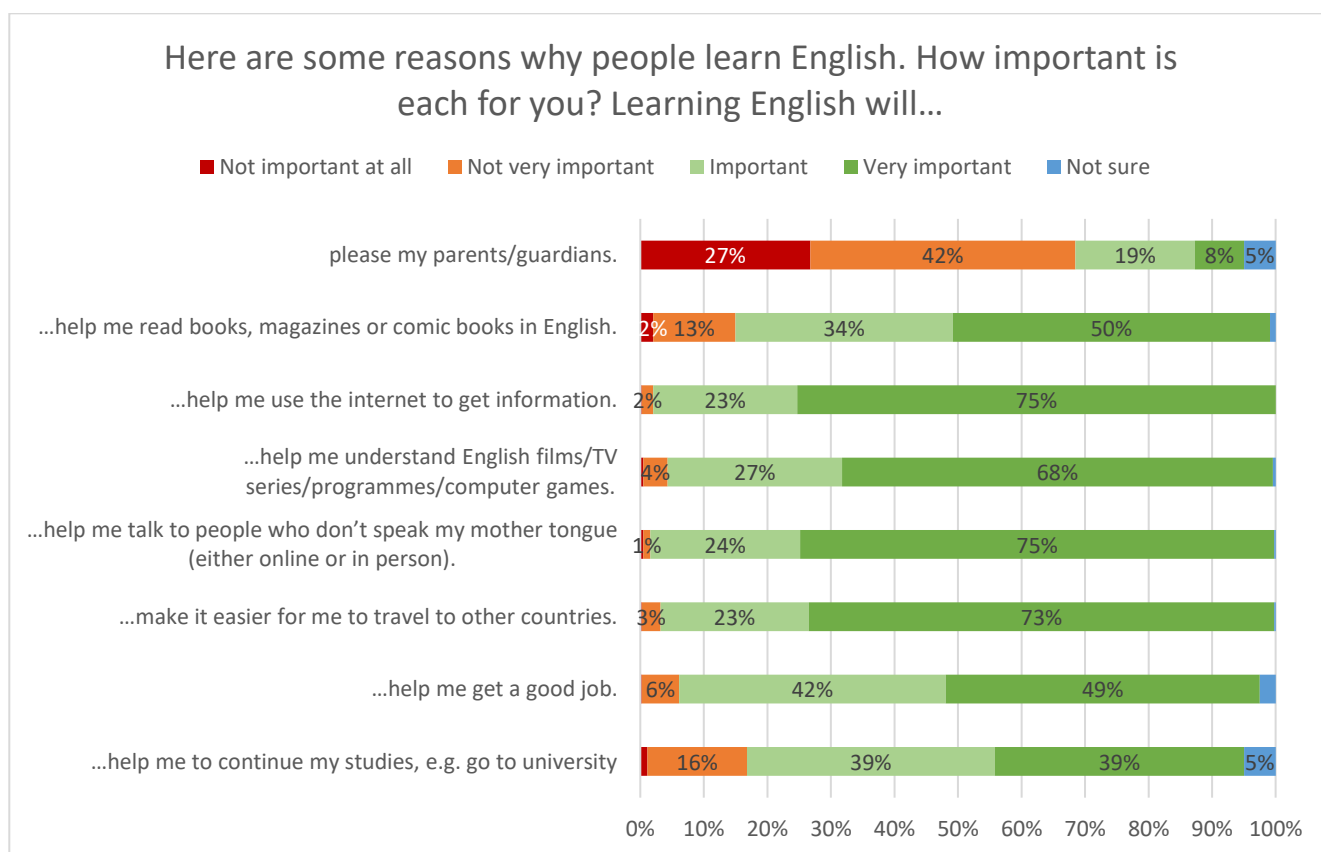


Figure 7: Reasons for learning English – importance according to students

Students were also asked about their attitude towards learning English. Well over 90% of students agreed that they wanted to learn English, that they liked learning it, and it was important for them. Interestingly, 98% of students said that they believed that they can learn English well enough to use it in real life, 96% said that they believe they can improve their English if they work hard, and 90% reported that they felt it was their responsibility to try hard at school, all of which suggest that the vast

majority of students have a growth mindset with regard to learning, and learning English specifically. A growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) is the idea that intelligence or ability is not a fixed attribute but can be nurtured and developed. Studies have shown strong correlations between a growth mindset and higher levels of learner achievement (Schleicher, 2018).

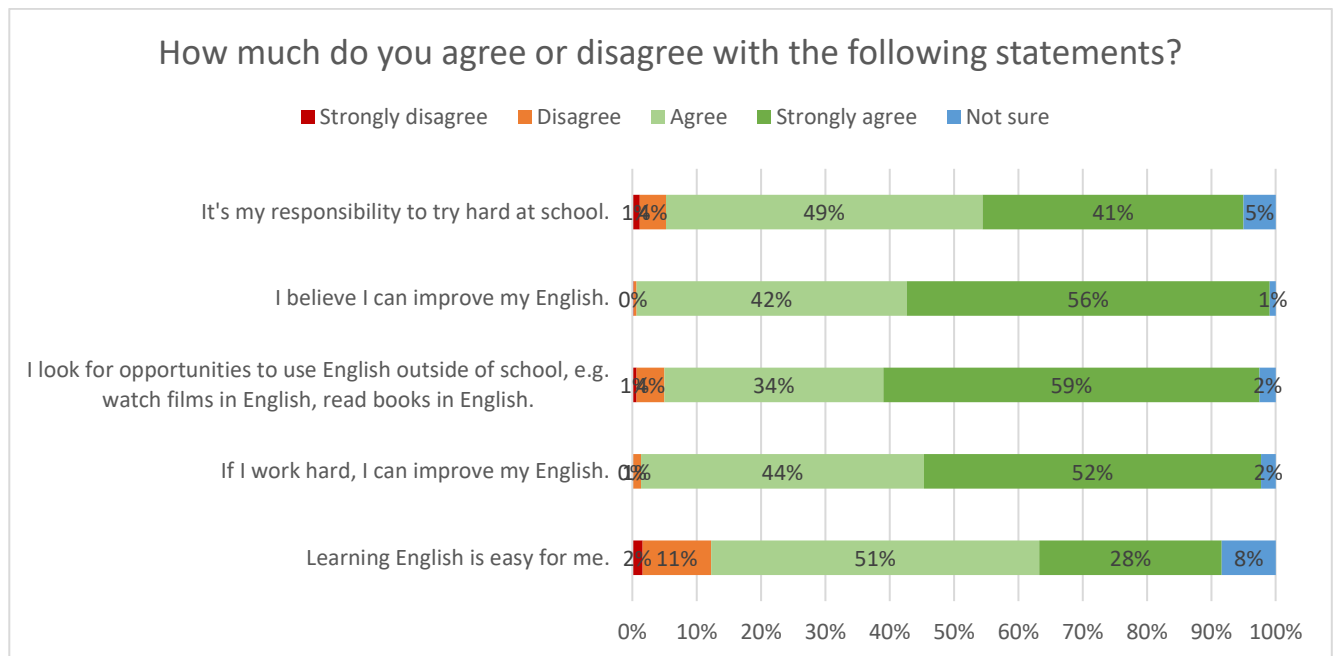


Figure 8: Student attitudes to English related to growth mindset

89% of students said that they try to use English when they have the opportunity, even if they make mistakes, and 93% reported that they look for opportunities to use English outside school, both of which suggest that they have embraced the idea of action-oriented learning (Council of Europe, 2020), and understand the importance of active learning in their English language acquisition.

This finding was supported in the qualitative data. Some students emphasised the importance of feedback for their learning process, suggesting their active engagement in learning:

I still feel a need to have more tasks that give me feedback. I will not improve my English just by doing the tasks, I need feedback as well.

If you make mistakes then we get corrected and then we can improve on it.

Significant proportions of students, 79% and 86% respectively, also reported that they were good at English and learning English was easy for them. This suggests that most learners are confident in their English ability. This confidence also came across in interactions with students in focus groups or lessons; when asked questions, students generally expressed themselves assuredly in spoken English.

Results

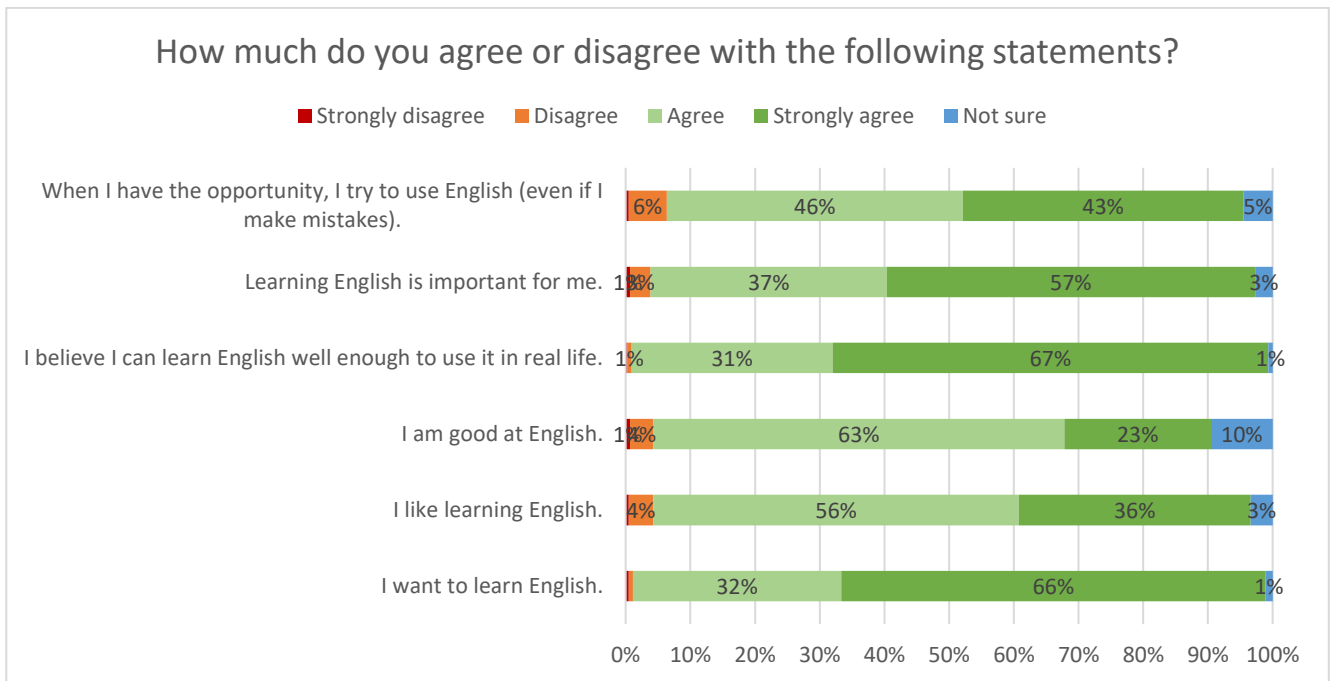


Figure 9: Students' attitude to learning English

Student self-assessment of English skills

Students were asked to rank their English language skills and systems in order of strongest to weakest. Speaking and Listening were ranked as equal strongest with Grammar and Vocabulary as weakest.

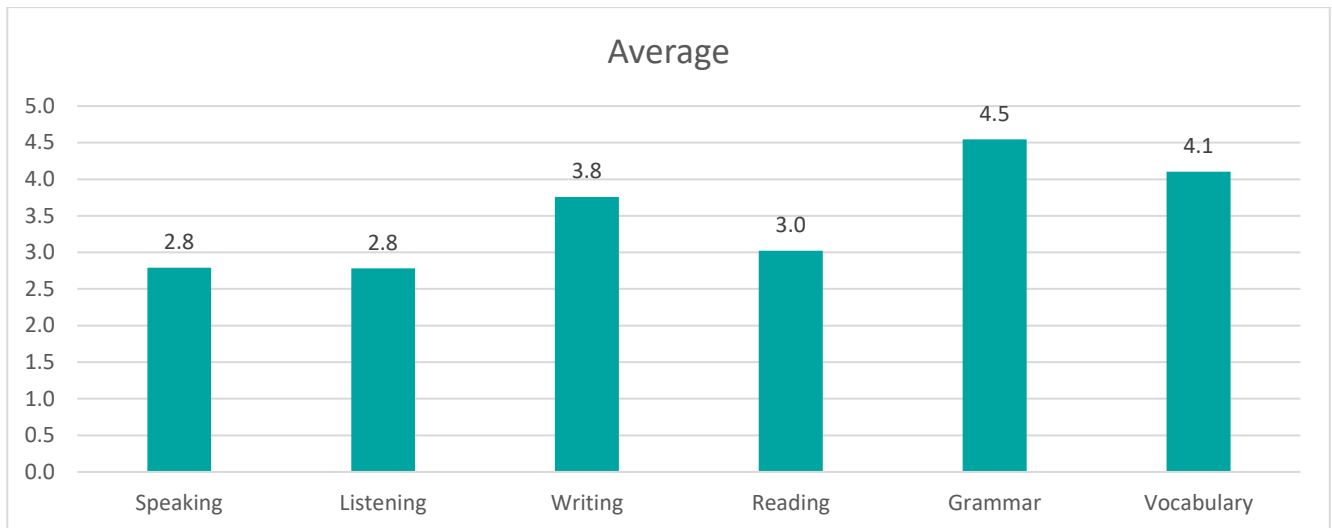


Figure 10: Students' self-assessment of their English skills and systems in order from strongest to weakest

Note: The lower the number, the higher the ranking.

Interestingly, when students were then asked which skill they would most like to improve, despite Speaking being rated as the equal strongest skill, it was also the one that students wanted to improve the most. Furthermore, there was a perception that the receptive skills, Listening and particularly Reading, were the ones that students were least interested in improving.

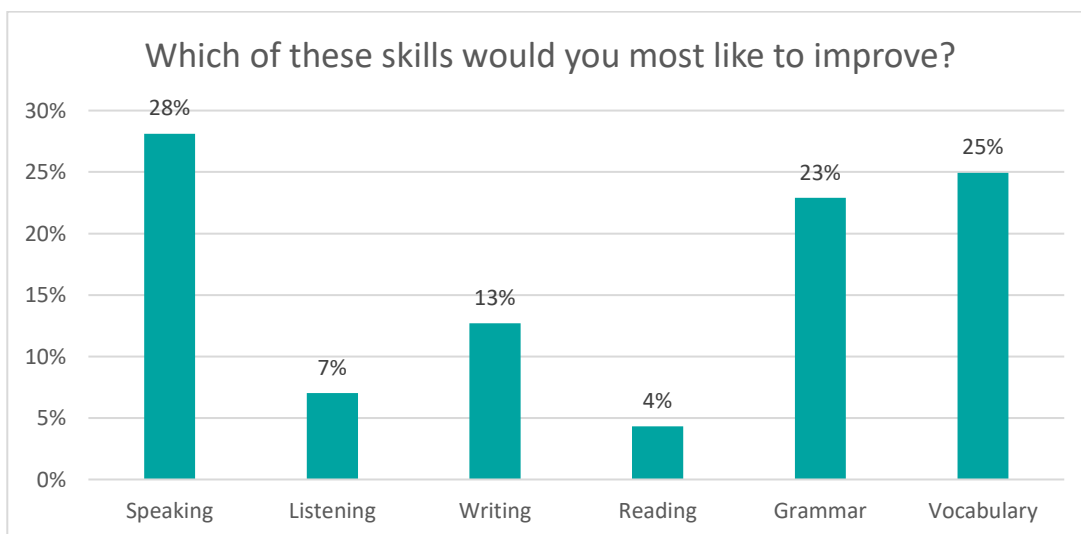


Figure 11: Students' preferred English skill to improve

Teacher attitude and confidence

Studies have suggested that there is a link between higher levels of learner independence and successful learning (Hattie, 2009), and so it is generally perceived in the literature that teachers should promote learner autonomy (Reinders, 2010). When asked their views on learner independence and its importance, 97% of teachers agreed that students who are independent learners tend to do well, and 92% said that it was a teacher's role to help students become independent learners. The picture was a little more mixed for the role of assessment in fostering learner independence, however, with 67% saying that it had an important role in helping students become independent learners.

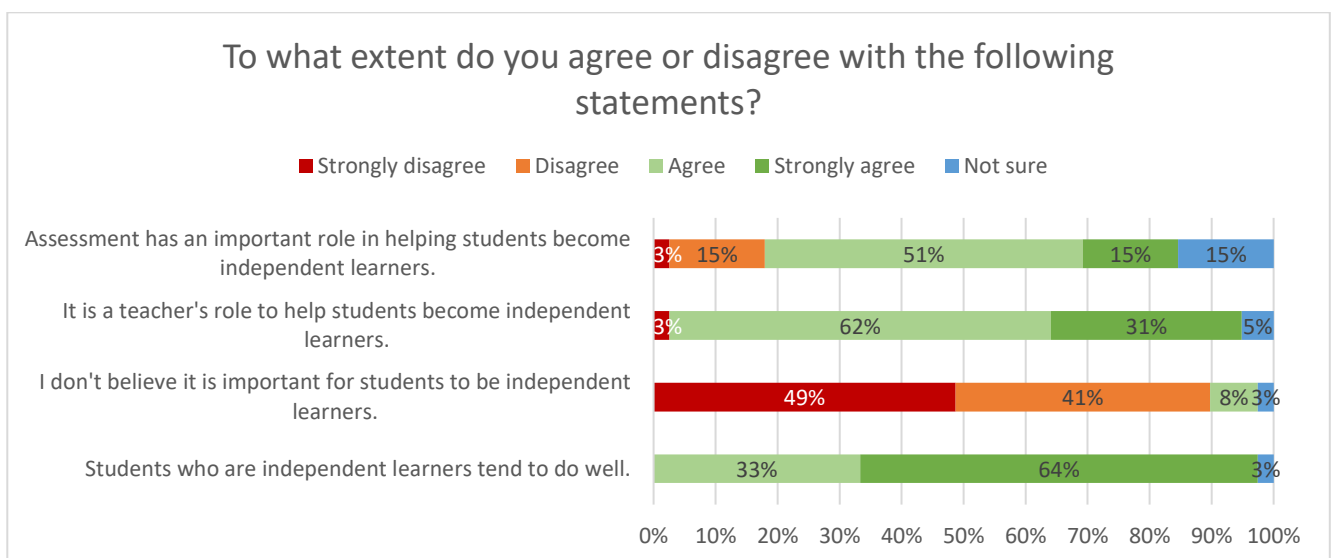


Figure 12: Teacher views on learner independence

Confidence in their teaching ability and language skills is an important quality for teachers to have. It is linked to self-efficacy and correlates with a number of positive traits such as commitment, motivating students, and coping with challenges (Klassen & Tze, 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Teachers in Estonia self-reported very high levels of confidence in their planning, creating teaching materials, classroom teaching in English and assessing students, reflecting the experience, qualifications and high-level of English in the cohort surveyed. This confidence also came across during lesson observations – teachers were assured in their use of English and classroom management.

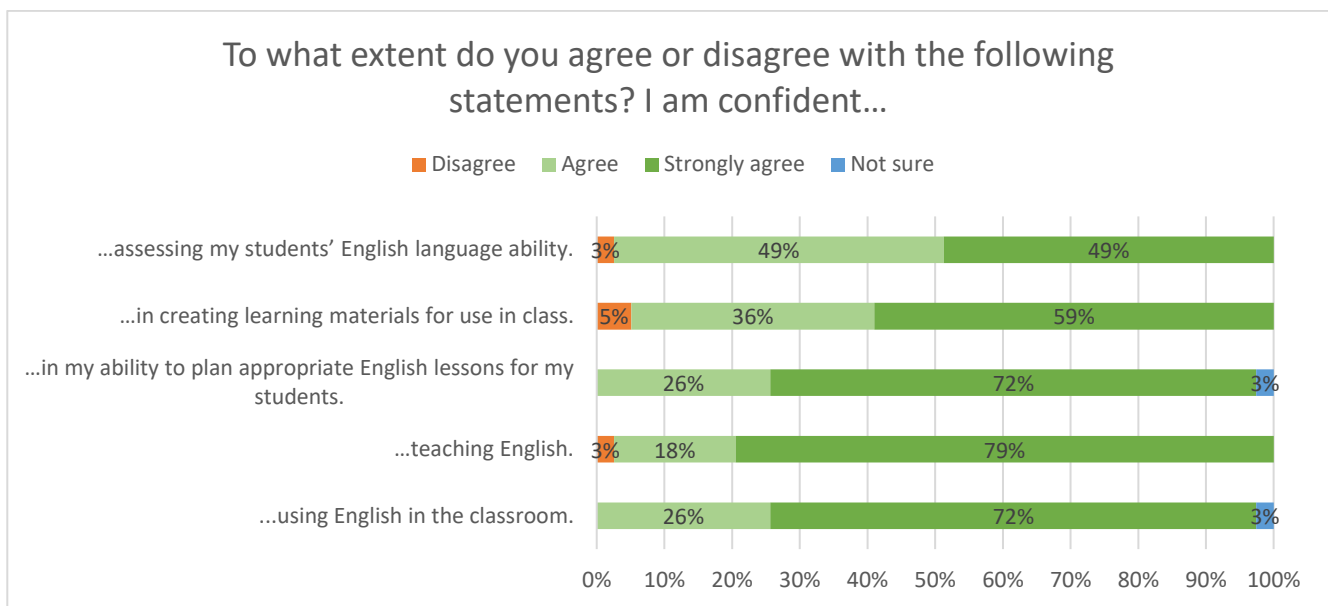


Figure 13: Teacher confidence

Teachers were also asked a set of questions designed to assess their attitude to learning. In particular, we were interested to see if they demonstrated beliefs associated with a growth mindset, or its opposite, a fixed mindset (see section on 'Student motivation and attitude' for an explanation of growth mindset).

Encouragingly, 97% of teachers surveyed believed that all their students can learn English and 95% said that if students work hard, they will improve. Furthermore, only 21% were of the opinion that intelligence is more important than effort when learning English and only 38% said that they thought that some students can never be good at English. These findings suggest that most teachers in Estonia are more growth-mindset, rather than fixed-mindset, oriented.

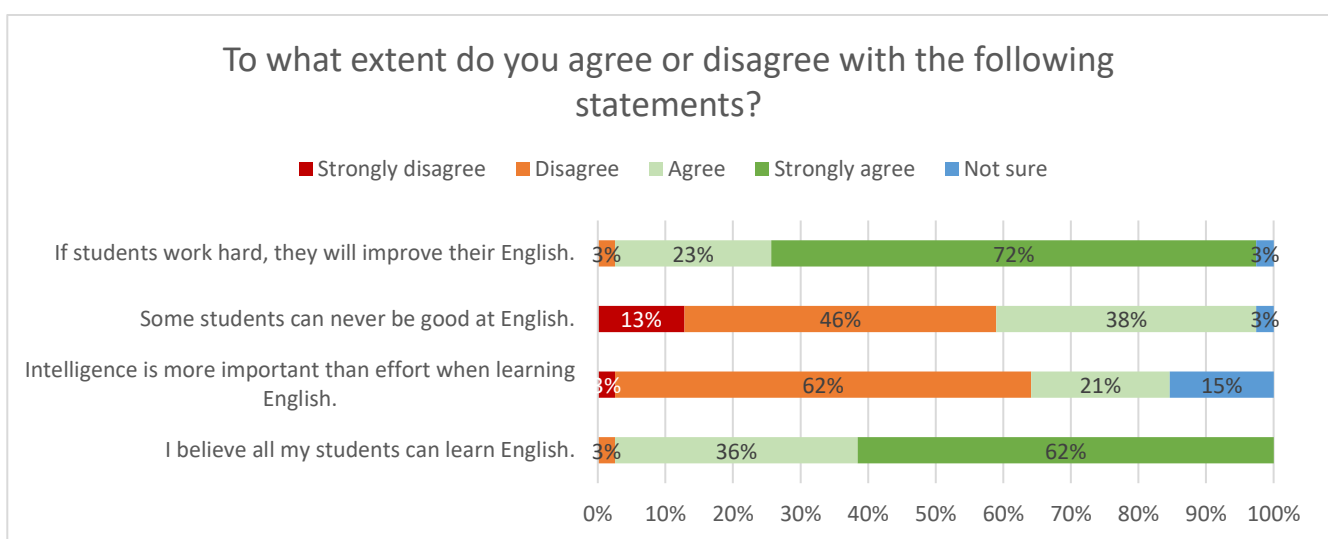


Figure 14: Teacher attitude to student achievement: fixed vs. growth mindset

Overall, findings regarding English teaching and learning in Estonia reflected positively on teaching practices, attitudes, motivation and confidence of both teachers and learners.

PERFORMANCE OF C1 ADVANCED CANDIDATES IN ESTONIA

Candidates in Estonia generally perform well in the C1 Advanced exam. Taking the most recently published results, 83.1% of candidates in Estonia in 2022/23 achieved the target level of the exam (C1 or above) compared to 79.6% of candidates in Europe and 77.8% of candidates globally in 2022.

If we compare data from before the integration of the C1 Advanced into the Estonian education system with those post-integration, there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant difference in the number of students achieving a certificated C1 or above level of English proficiency. Figure 15 below shows data from 2015 to 2023. Between 2015 and 2018 the number of successful candidates grew steadily from around six hundred to just over a thousand. However, in 2019, when the opportunity for students to take the C1 Advanced as a school leaving exam was introduced, the number of students who achieved a certificate validating their English level at C1 or C2 increased dramatically, more than doubling between 2018 and 2019, and growing rapidly to around four thousand in 2022 and 2023 (see Appendix 1 for specifics).

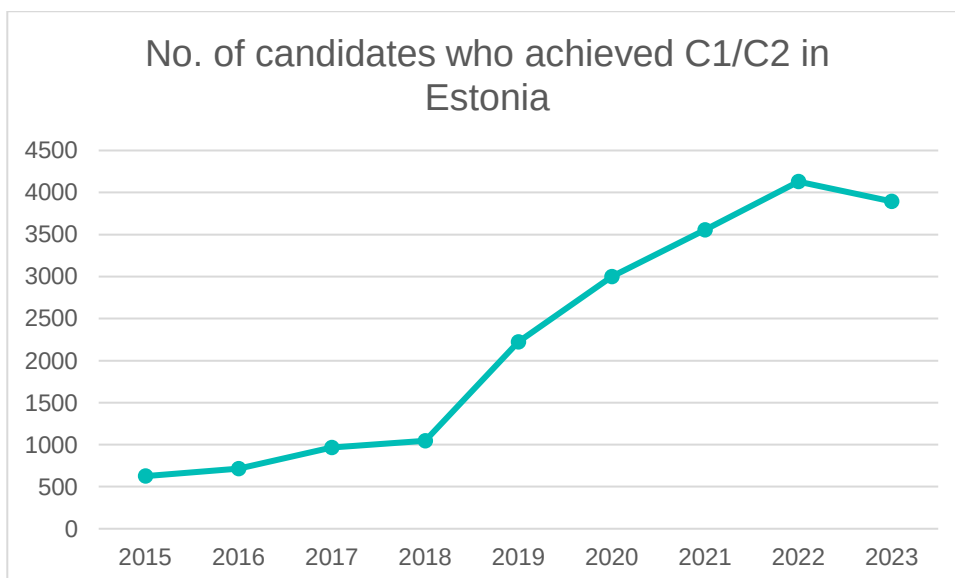


Figure 15: Successful C1 Advanced candidates in Estonia by year

This increase in the number of successful candidates has been coincident with an increase in the number of candidates as a whole. As can be seen in Figure 16 below, candidature has grown from just over 4,200 in 2021/22 to almost 4,900 in 2022/23, although this has dipped slightly in 2023/24.

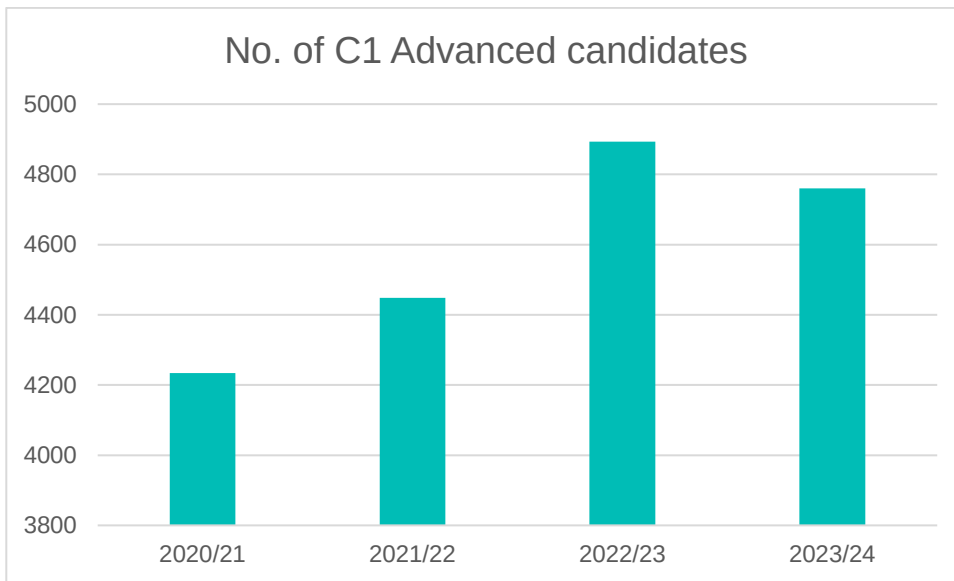


Figure 16: Number of C1 Advanced candidates in Estonia by academic year

Over this recent period, despite the substantial year-on-year increase in candidates, the percentage of successful candidates has actually increased (see Figure 17 below).

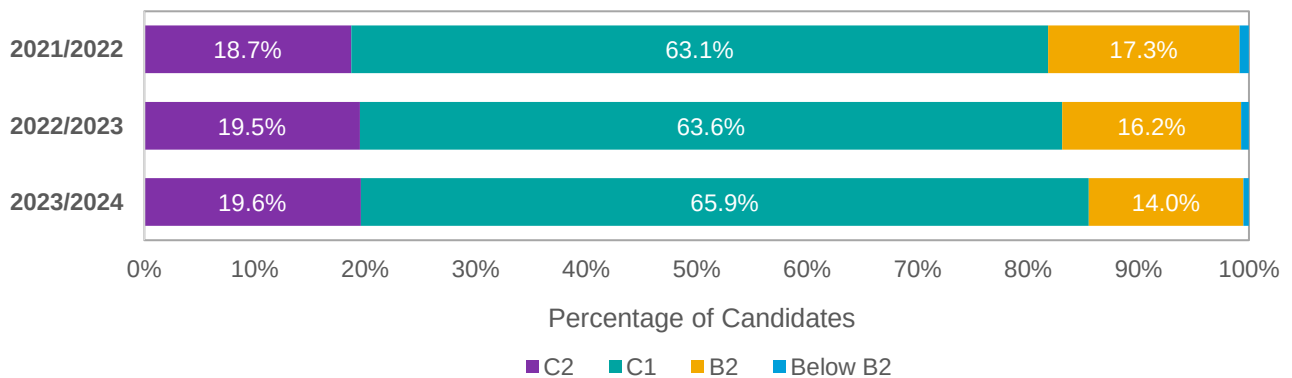


Figure 17: Performance of C1 Advanced candidates in Estonia by academic year

Turning to performance in individual exam components, proficiency levels have been particularly high in the Speaking and Listening parts of the exam, with over 85% of candidates consistently achieving a C1 or C2 level in each. In contrast, the Reading component has been the weakest with just over 70% of candidates achieving C1 or above in each of the last three years (see Figure 18 below).

Results

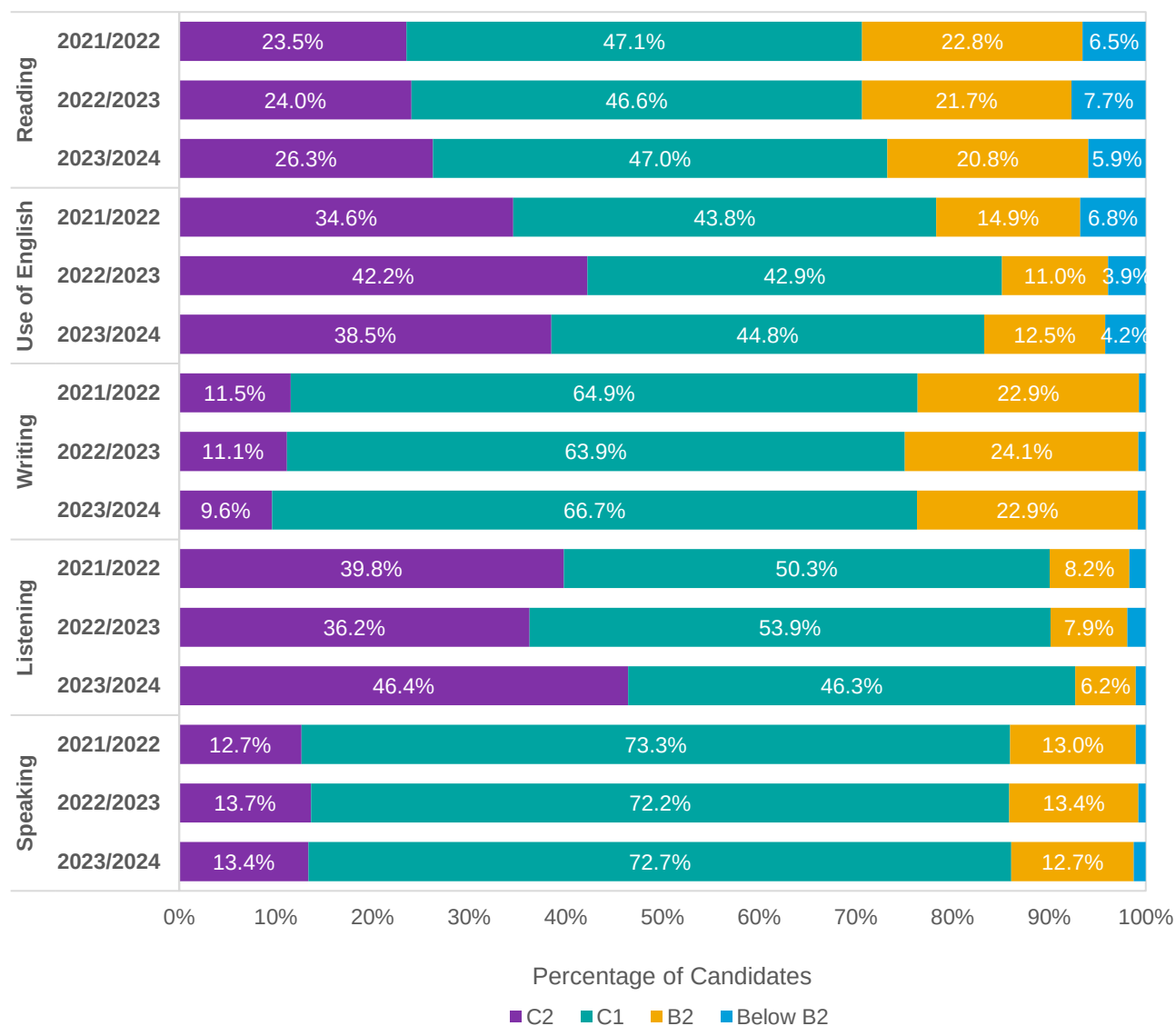


Figure 18: Candidates' C1 Advanced results (in CEFR levels) across the 2020/21 to 2022/23 exam sessions, per test component*

*Unmarked "Below B2" English level of proficiency represents less than 2% of candidates.

In summary, in the approximately five years since the C1 Advanced was introduced as a school leaving exam, around twenty thousand Estonia students have taken the exam, with over 80% of those achieving the target level of C1 or above. This represents a much greater number of successful students than prior to the integration of the exam in the school system.

Furthermore, the percentage of successful students has actually increased gradually from year to year. If the proficiency of the population as a whole remained stable, yet candidature increases, we would expect to see a drop in the percentage of successful candidates. However, the opposite is true, which suggests that the proficiency of the population is improving.

IMPACT OF C1 ADVANCED ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Data were also gathered in questionnaires, focus groups and lesson observations to assess the effect of the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonian education system. Areas of focus were attitude and perception of the exam, and how the exam influenced teaching and learning practices. We were also interested to find out what learning materials were being used and what influence they had on teaching and learning.

Teachers

We asked teachers one broad question about their perception of the introduction of the C1 Exam, and a range of questions more specifically related to changes in teaching and learning. Teachers were asked to decide if they thought the introduction of the exam had been positive, negative or neutral. An overwhelming 95% of teachers chose positive, with the remaining 5% choosing neutral.

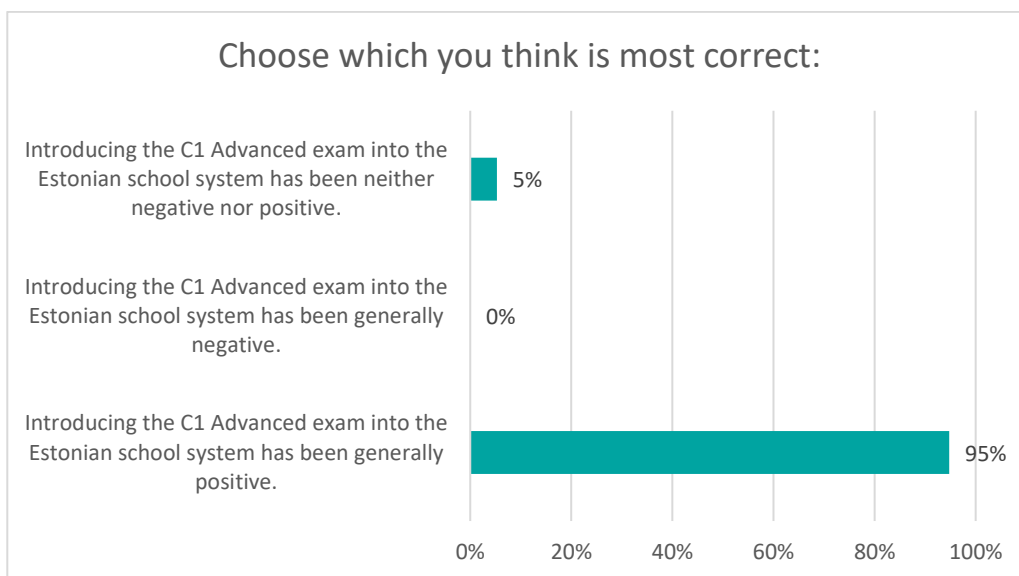


Figure 19: Teacher perception of C1 Advanced exam

Teachers were also asked whether preparing students for the exam had affected their teaching practices or beliefs. There was an approximately 50/50 split here with 51% answering in the affirmative and 49% in the negative. This suggests that there has been an impact on what happens in the classroom when preparing for the exam for around half of teachers. Given the finding in the previous question, it is safe to assume that the changes have been largely positive.

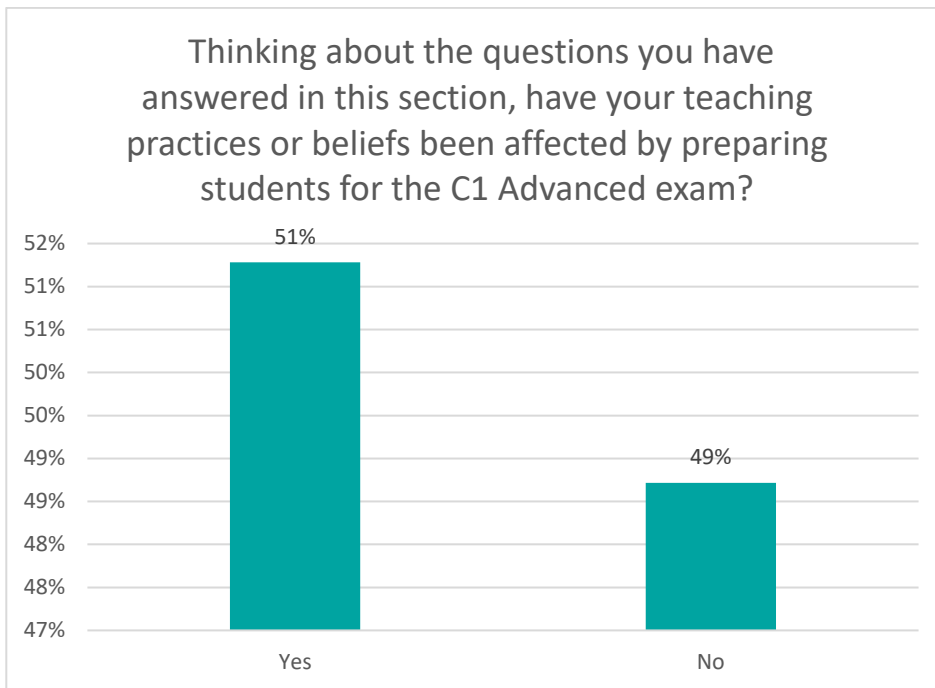


Figure 20: Influence of C1 Advanced on teaching

Teachers were then asked some questions specifically on classroom practice and the influence of the C1 exam. 89% of teachers surveyed agreed that the C1 Advanced is helping them structure their lessons and planning, and 87% said that it is helping them define learning objectives and outcomes. Furthermore, 97% reported that the exam influences the activities chosen for lessons and 84% said that it influences the homework they set. 87% also agreed that the C1 Advanced elicits language skills that students can use in real life and that it supports communicative English teaching.

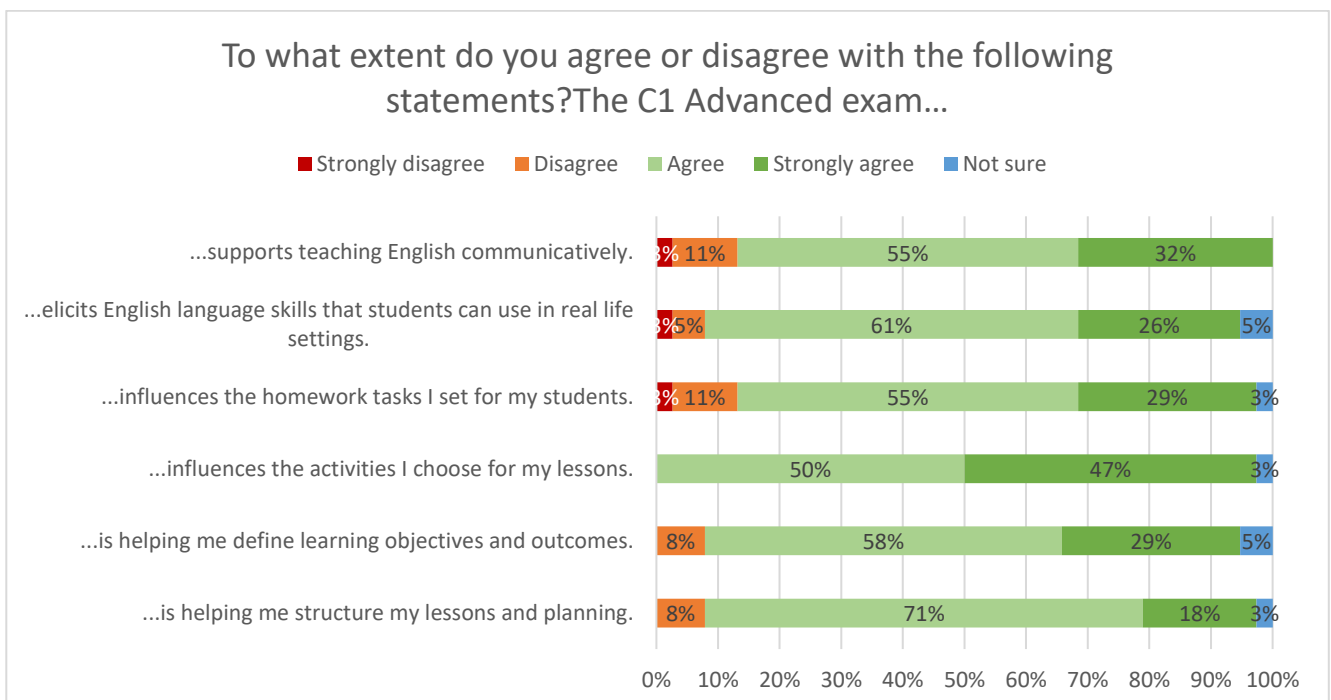


Figure 21: C1 Advanced areas of Influence on teaching

Some of the findings outlined above were supported by data collected in the open questions in the questionnaires and focus group interviews with teachers around Estonia. One thing that came out strongly was that most teachers had changed what they do in the lessons for students preparing for the exam. There is an increased focus on exam skills, particularly collaborative speaking activities, and teachers concentrate on more advanced vocabulary, reflecting the C1 level. Writing is also an area that teachers spend more lesson time on, with the introduction of a range of writing genres mirroring those tested in the exam.

It has changed my focus in the lessons. I pay more attention to preparing students for the C1 exam, focusing on certain exam skills, e.g. speaking exam is totally different from our state exam speaking task. [Comment from questionnaire]

(Talking about the speaking exam) *And the Estonia [national English] exam, they take it alone, but the Cambridge exam in pairs. This national exam, you have to take this two-minute monologue. [The Cambridge C1 Advanced] is a dialogue and [the Estonia national exam] a monologue – it's the main difference. So we have to practise. They sit in pairs and [we] make them speak* [Teacher Focus Group 1, Teacher 4]

I must pay attention to teaching advanced vocabulary, more sophisticated grammar structures, writing formats such as proposals and reviews, and more importantly practicing collaborative speaking tasks in pairs and small groups. [Comment from questionnaire]

We have started to write more in the lessons. [Comment from questionnaire]

Some teachers also remarked on the weak reading skills of their students. They talked about how they placed more emphasis on close textual reading.

I do now much more advanced text analysis than I did before. [Comment from questionnaire]

We go through the text, we're trying to kind of live in the text and we experience it and then, OK what is the synonym? What is the antonym? What is the noun? What is the verb? What is the adjective... [Teacher Focus Group 1, Teacher 6]

In some schools, the impact of the C1 Advanced was reported in teaching practices in lessons which were not yet focused on preparing students for the exam:

Now with strong groups, we start implementing advanced language, C1 language, already in the 11th grade, with some classes already in the 10th, because we have this goal there they need to get to. [Teacher Focus Group 4, Teacher 6]

Teachers were also asked about the learning material that they used to prepare students for the exam. It was found that teachers use a variety of textbooks as schools have autonomy to choose their own. Among those mentioned were the Upstream and Wishes series by Express Publishing, Gateway C1 by Macmillan and the Solutions series by Oxford University Press. Teachers were generally

positive about the textbooks they used and commented on how the activities matched the task types from the exam, and therefore helped students to both learn English and understand what they would be required to do in the C1 Advanced.

Teachers also mentioned other resources that they used such as exam practice books, the *Write and Improve* website, and teachers at one school reported that some of their students had paid for Cambridge's *Test and Train* resource. The feeling was that all of these were helpful in preparing students for the exam, but it was very clear that teachers were free to use these, as well as the textbooks, in ways that they thought appropriate, and therefore, that this was not standardised across the country or even in individual schools.

Comments from one new teacher, were, however, indicative of the importance of the textbook:

Well, since I'm a new teacher, I don't have a backlog of other study materials and you know, like I started from a blank page. So to say, I'm, that's why I'm a textbook person and that means that I just go through the textbook [Teacher Focus Group 1, Teacher 6]

Teachers were also asked questions regarding how they felt their students were impacted by studying for the C1 Advanced exam. 95% thought the topics in the exam were interesting for students, suggesting good levels of engagement, 95% also thought that studying for the exam motivated them and 92% said they thought it helped build students' confidence.

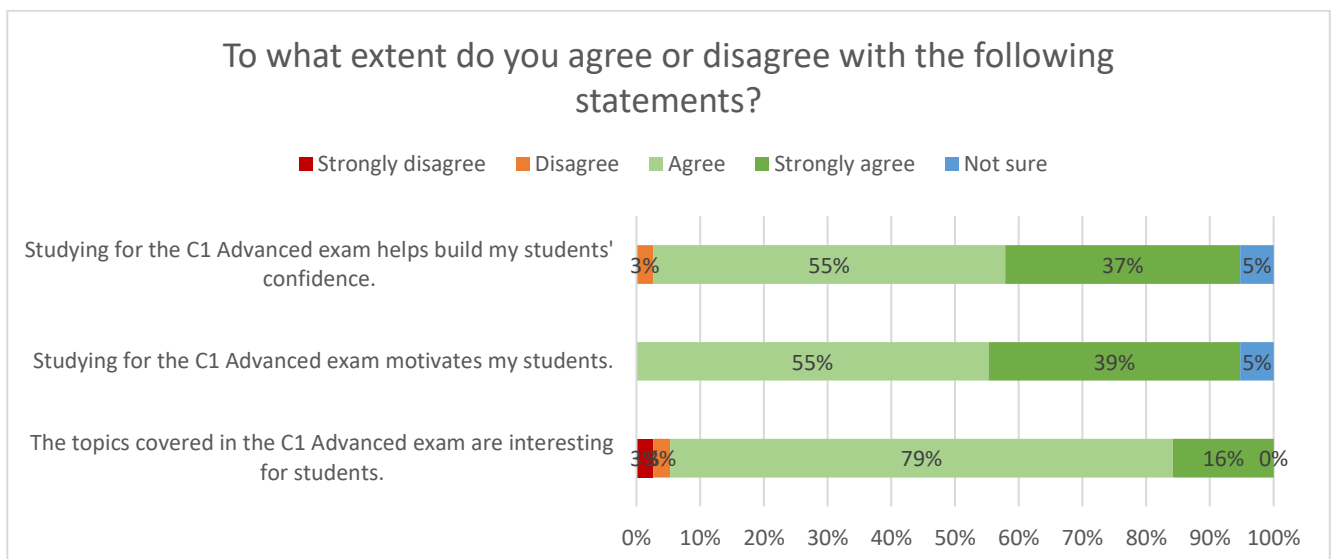


Figure 22: Effects of studying for C1 Advanced

Some of these findings were supported by the qualitative data gathered from both the questionnaires and the focus groups. Teachers mentioned that the increased level of the C1 Advanced was a motivational factor as students had to study harder to achieve it:

The positive effect [of the C1 Advanced] involves a rapid increase in motivation making a lot of effort to enhance the level of language skills. [Comment from questionnaire]

They come here from basic school where it has been too easy. Some of them have never done any homework in English, never learned any words, nothing, because it comes from... internet, movies, anything. And now they come here and we start introducing the advanced language right away, that it's different, higher level, and it takes them a while, but they soon realise: uhoh, I need to start studying... but they can keep up with it, many of them can, and that's interesting. And I think many have become more motivated. [Teacher Focus Group 4, Teacher 6]

Also mentioned by teachers was the fact that students' language skills are recognised at a higher level – C1 or above – in comparison to the national exam which only reports up to B2:

Capable and smart students can receive the appropriate language level [C1] and it increases their motivation. [Comment from questionnaire]

Students whose level of English is likely to become higher than B2, which is required by the National Curriculum, are more motivated to continue learning and aim still higher. [Comment from questionnaire]

Furthermore, teachers highlighted an unexpected outcome of having the C1 Advanced as part of the school-leaving exams: students can sit the Cambridge exam earlier in the school year than the national exam which means that they can then concentrate on other subjects.

One motivation that our students have in passing the Cambridge [exam] is that they get excused from English lessons after that. So that is a big motivation. [Teacher Focus Group 1, Teacher 6]

Teachers also felt that studying for the exam helped to drive improvements in students' English levels. 61% of those surveyed said that their students' English improves more than usual while studying for the C1 Advanced.

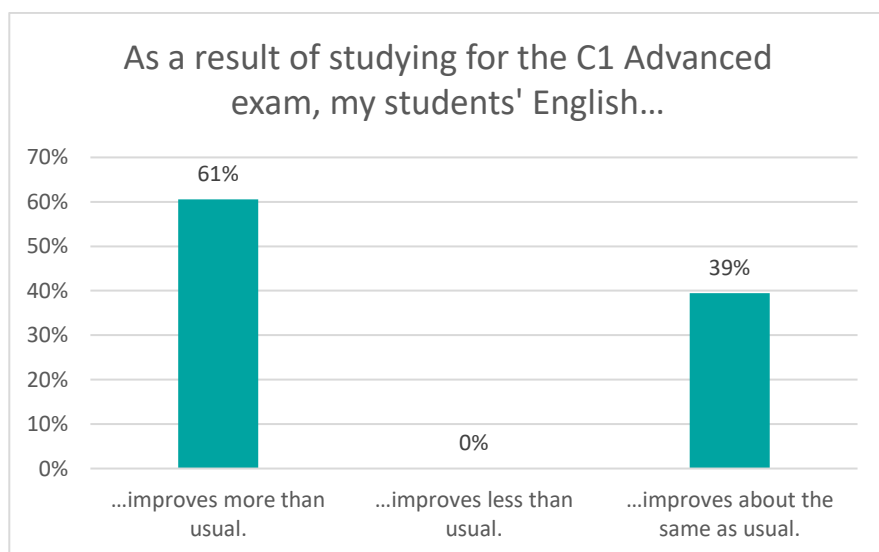


Figure 23: C1 Advanced effect on English proficiency

This finding was echoed in the qualitative data, and some teachers felt that it was improving teaching standards too:

The overall level of English has improved. Many teachers work hard to help their students pass the exam and therefore their lessons are of better quality. [Comment from questionnaire]

I'd say definitely the level that we use in in classes has changed... definitely the level has gone up by a lot. [Teacher Focus Group 4, Teacher 6]

[Classes now have] more focus on higher-level skills – C1 – useful for future studies and work. [Comment from questionnaire]

The level of assignments has gone up [in my classes]. I sometimes use C2 materials to prepare stronger groups for the exam. [Comment from questionnaire]

Teacher-reported negative outcomes

Teachers also mentioned some things they felt were negative about the introduction of the C1 Advanced exam. Firstly, they felt that because students had to work harder in class to achieve the target level of the exam, there was less class time for creative, fun activities. In other words, the introduction of the exam had led to a narrowing of the curriculum:

I have to teach certain rules for writing, difference in B2 and C1 vocabulary. It [teaching for the C1 exam] puts limits on my creativity. [Comment from questionnaire]

Unfortunately, I have also dropped some “fun” activities because we have to work hard to pass the exam. [Comment from questionnaire]

And there's another thing that has changed... [before the introduction of C1 Advanced,] there was not much pressure. We had free time, which, which meant that we could do interesting and fun things in class as well. Creative things. I remember I like watching My Fair Lady and analysing it. It's culture, it's, you know, these things or talking about dialects and doing presentations on different dialects and these things. I don't have time for these things anymore because the exam is difficult. Even if they are good at English, they still don't feel confident enough. There are still things they don't know. So I've skipped that. The fun part of the learning process. [Teacher Focus Group 4, Teacher 6]

It was also felt that having both the national exam and the C1 Advanced created something of a two-tier system, which could be demotivating for some students while also making the job harder for teachers:

The main negative effect I see is that with the introduction of C1 Advanced, we now have two different exams. This means that those students who end up taking the other exam (levels B1-B2) might view themselves as “losers” compared to their peers who are taking the C1 Advanced and some might lose too much confidence in their language skills. Also, the two-exam system poses some difficulties in teaching and (re)organising language groups. The

situation in which you need to be able to prepare students in the same group for two different exams is not the most efficient or stress-free. [Comment from questionnaire]

Students who do not qualify for the C1 Advanced exam lose motivation to learn. [Comment from questionnaire]

The people who are not, who haven't passed the pre-test, you know, they feel a little bit like losers which is not good. [Teacher Focus Group 4, Teacher 3]

They feel like failures and now we, this year we tried it out, first time that we have those students who are going to take national exam separately in one group, and because it's very difficult after we know with who is going to take which exam to teach them in the same group because, you know, the material is different. And luckily, our head teacher managed to come up with the system and we have them separately now. This group does not, they're not that motivated. They know they have failed something. [Teacher Focus Group 4, Teacher 6]

In summary, teachers have reported two main negative outcomes of the introduction of the C1 Advanced. Firstly, the demands of preparing for the exam means that there is much less time to do non-exam-specific activities during class. Effectively, the taught curriculum is narrower. Secondly, the fact that the exam is selective means that those students not chosen may develop a negative view of their English ability and lose motivation to learn.

Students

Students reported overwhelmingly (94%) that doing well on the C1 exam was important for them. However, this was in contrast to the much lower percentages who said that they liked the exam (61%), liked the topics in the exam (55%), and said that the exam motivated them to study English (71%). These findings would suggest that the result of the exam, or perhaps more likely, the usability of the qualification, is more important than any intrinsic qualities of the exam itself. This will be investigated in more detail in the section 'Impact of C1 Advanced after graduation' below.

However, quite a few students in the focus groups did mention that challenging themselves with the C1 Advanced exam and competing with their peers was motivating:

I would like to get a C1 or maybe even a C2... it brings me like a challenge. [Student Focus Group 2, Student 4]

I have a friend who took it a year before and he got C1 and almost C2. So I tried, tried to beat him. [Student Focus Group 2, Student 6]

I mean, I think everyone loves bragging rights too - having a C2. [Student Focus Group 3, Student 9]

Students were asked two questions designed to assess the construct of confidence in taking the exam. The findings were mixed. 71% said that they thought they could do well in the exam,

suggesting that over two-thirds of students were confident about their performance. However, an almost identical percentage (72%) reported that they were worried about taking the C1 Advanced. It is true that worrying about an exam is not necessarily mutually exclusive with feeling confident about performing well in it. These findings seem to suggest that most students are confident in their English ability but also find the exam somewhat stressful perhaps because they are aware of the importance of doing well.

Findings in the focus groups were in line with the above: some students mentioned that the exam was stressful for them:

I am most likely failing speaking because of the nerves or something. So yeah, it's weird to talk under pressure with the strange people around. [Student Focus Group 2, Student 2]

A little bit stressed, I think, because I don't think I deal with exams well and like, I understand that I'm doing the exam, I start to overthink everything. So maybe, I don't know. I think I'm most calm about the speaking and then stressed about everything else. [Student Focus Group 4, Student 2]

But many of them also felt confident:

I mean, I would, I would say that I'm not really worried about the exams, like, not to toot my own horn, but I would say the thing I'm most worried about, like the thing I'm most so, say, worried about is whether I get C2 or C1. [Student Focus Group 4, Student 3]

Students were also asked about the effect that the exam had on how much effort they put into studying English. 88% of students reported that they believed hard work would lead to a better exam result, 55% said that they worked harder when studying for the C1 Advanced than in their standard English classes, and 51% said they studied more outside the classroom too. These findings are quite a strong indication of the positive effect that studying for the exam has on motivation and behaviour. Furthermore, they are congruent with data about student feelings regarding their ability to improve their general English proficiency and lend further support to the finding that most students have a growth mindset (see section above on growth vs. fixed mindset).

Results

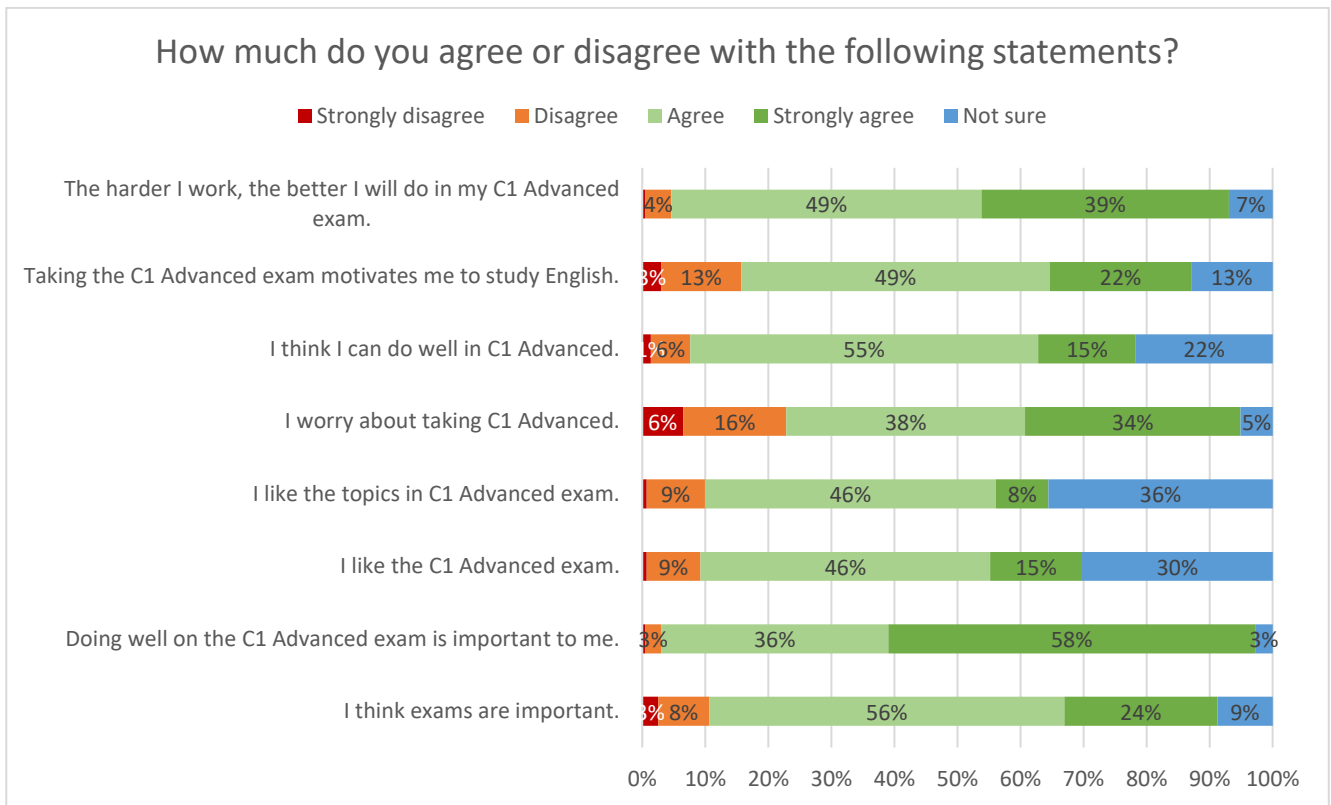


Figure 24: Student attitude to C1 Advanced exam

Former students were also asked a similar set of questions about their experience studying for the C1 Advanced exam. The results were not markedly different to those of current students except in that they were generally more positive about the exam and its importance. For example, 82% of former students said that they liked the C1 Advanced exam compared to just 61% of current students, and 84% of former students believed that they would do well in their exam, compared to 71% of current students. These findings may reflect that those former students who answered the questionnaire tended to be those who were successful in the exam.

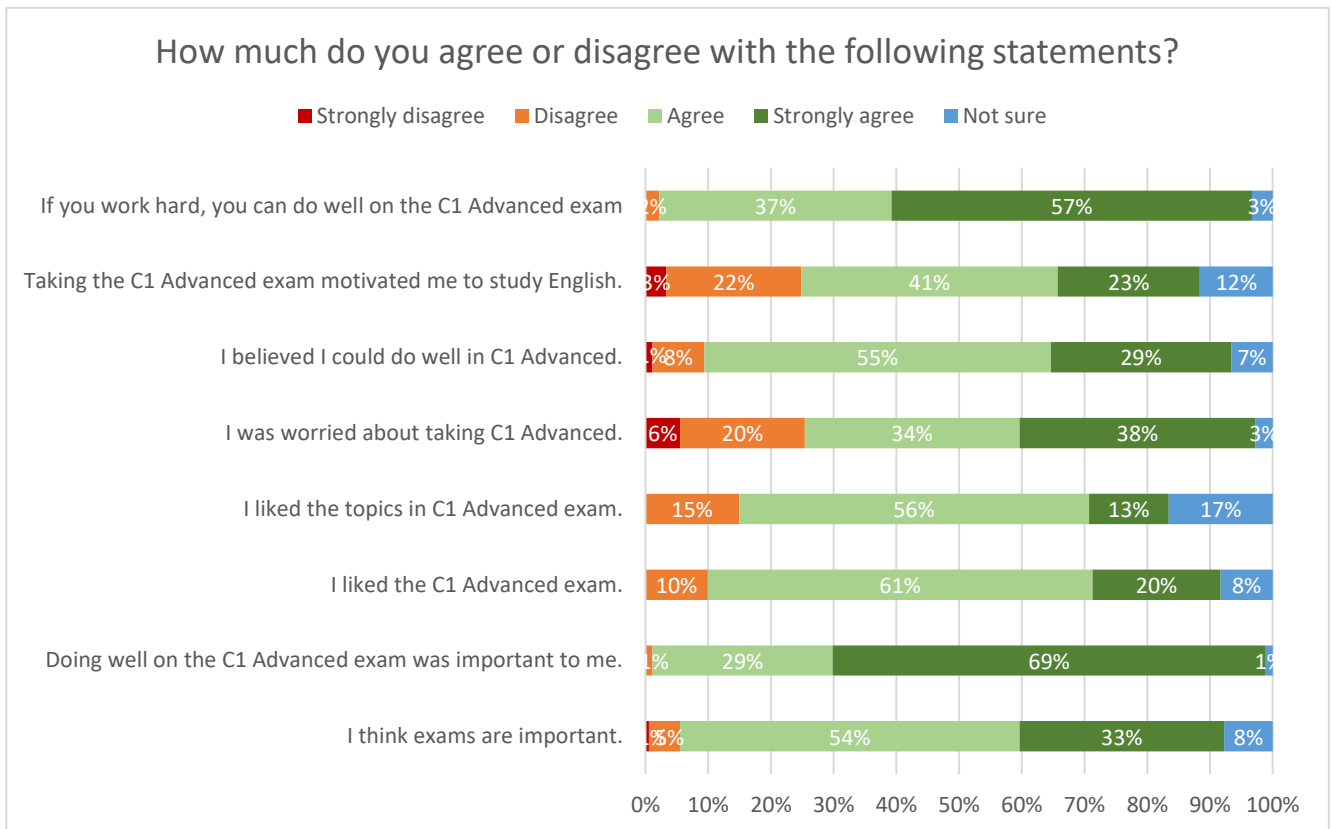


Figure 25: Former student attitude to C1 Advanced exam

Parents/guardians

We asked parents/guardians questions about the exam and their perceptions of it with regard to their child's experience of preparing for the test and its incorporation in the Estonian education system.

Overwhelmingly, parents/guardians were happy that their child had the opportunity to take the C1 Advanced exam with 99% answering in the affirmative. 98% also felt that the introduction of the exam added value to their child's education, and 78% thought that their child was motivated by the C1 Advanced. Generally, they did not feel that the exam generated too much work or pressure, with only 15% expressing concerns, although 55% did say that their child worried about taking the exam. Perhaps one negative finding here was that only 63% of parents/guardians felt that they had been given enough information about the C1 Advanced. This suggests that there is still work to be done in communicating some aspects of the test. It would be good to find out what specifically these are in order to address this gap.

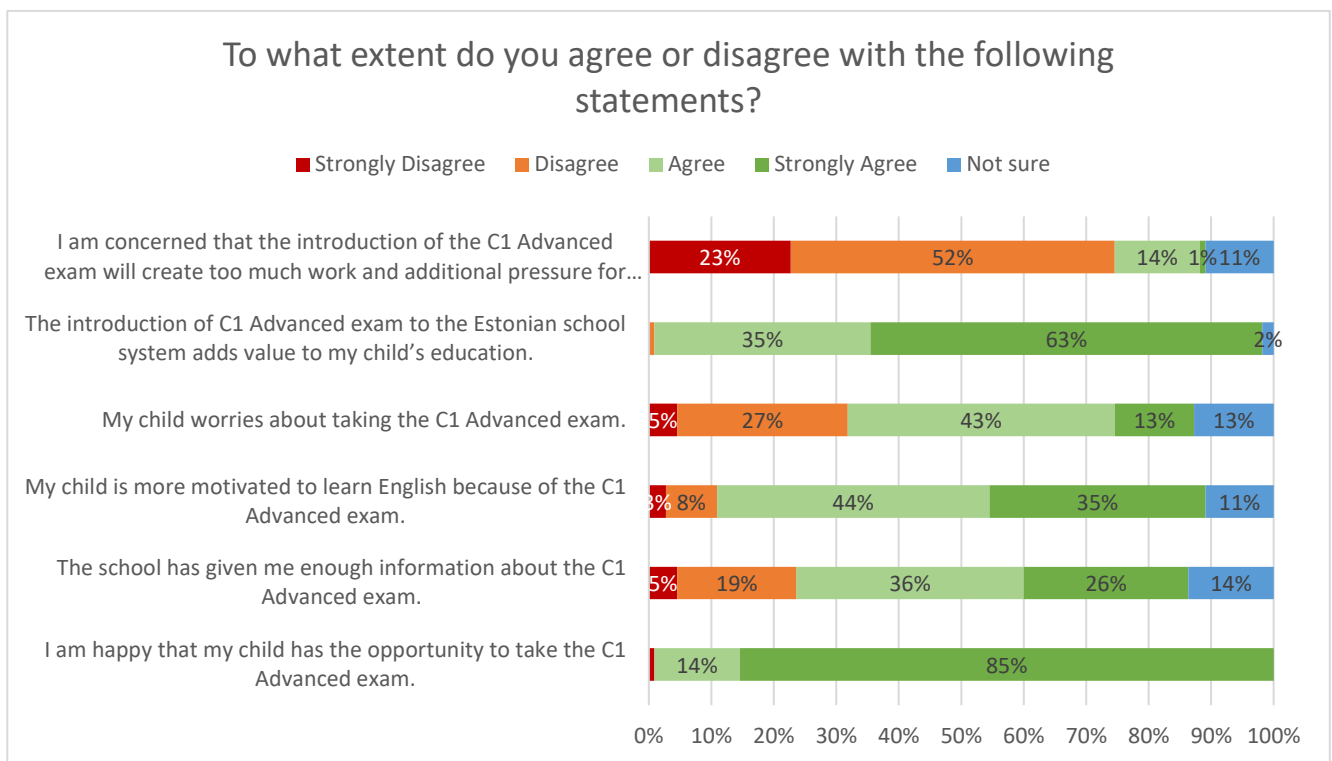


Figure 26: Parents'/guardians' perception of C1 Advanced exam

Parents/guardians were also asked an overarching question to determine their views more broadly of the C1 Advanced exam and its incorporation into the Estonian education system. 92% of those surveyed said that they thought introducing the C1 Advanced exam had been generally positive, with only 1% saying that they thought it was negative.

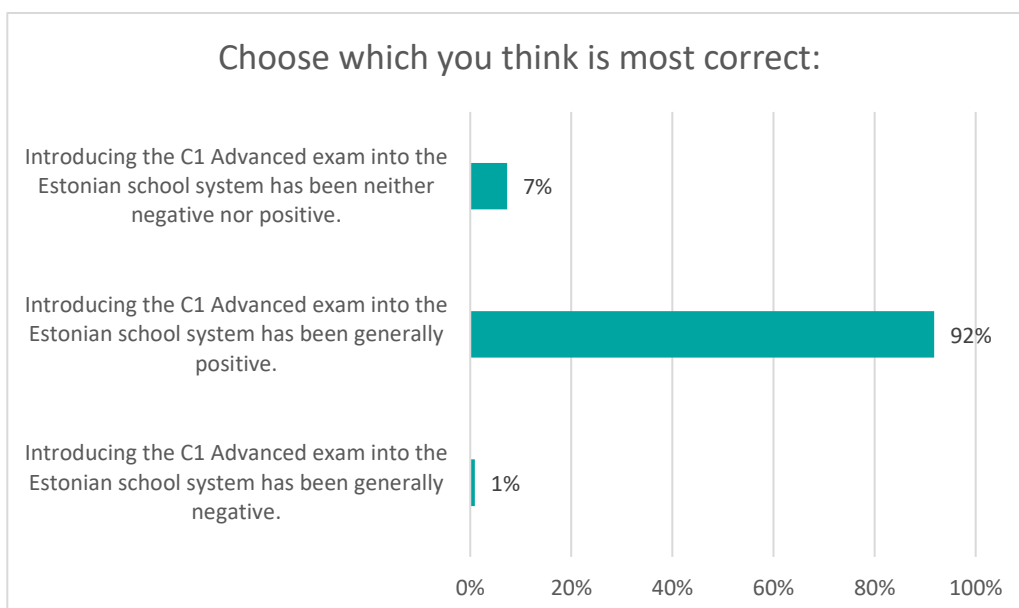


Figure 27: Parents'/guardians' overall perception of C1 Advanced exam

IMPACT OF C1 ADVANCED AFTER GRADUATION

Teachers and Parents/Guardians

We asked teachers about recognition of the C1 Advanced and whether achieving a C1 or above in the exam would change students' lives in the future. All of the teachers surveyed said that doing well in the exam will have a positive impact on students' future opportunities and 87% said that it will help students enter higher education or get a job. 76% of them said that the exam is recognised by universities in Estonia, and 61% of them that it is recognised by employers. Parents were asked the same set of questions with regard to their children and answers were similar. However, parents were less convinced of the recognition afforded the exam – 58% thought it recognised by universities and only 48% by employers.

However, a number of parents/guardians did comment on the opportunities that the C1 Advanced gives their children to study/work abroad:

[The C1 Advanced] gives the opportunity to participate/apply in international projects, e.g. as a volunteer. [It] expands opportunities to work abroad. [Comment from questionnaire]

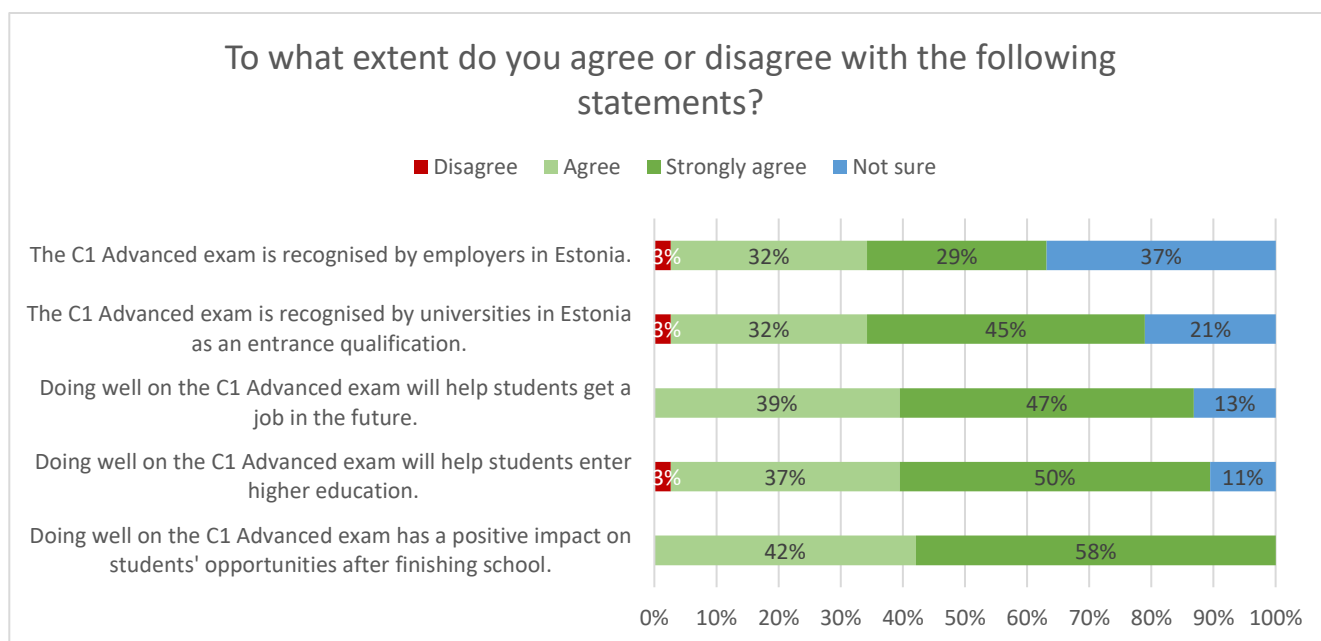


Figure 28: Teacher perceptions of utility of C1 Advanced in Estonia

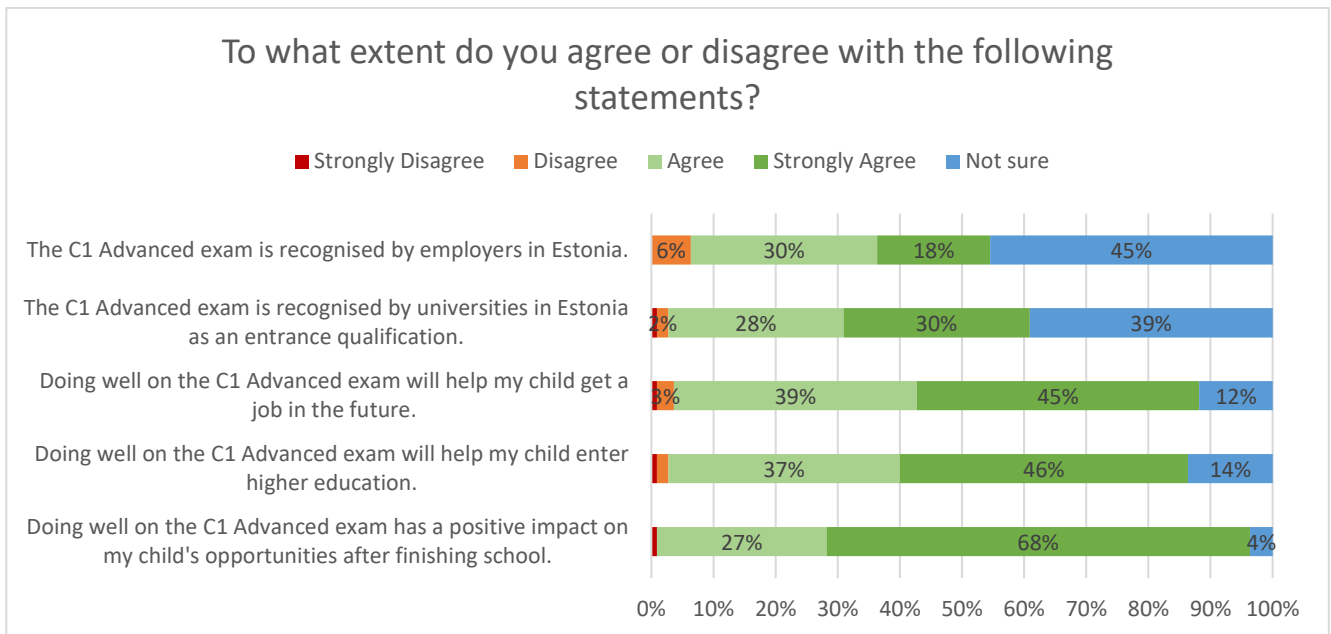


Figure 29: Parent/Guardian perceptions of utility of C1 Advanced in Estonia

Students and former students

Students were asked how they perceived the C1 Advanced qualification being useful for them in the future. The strongest positive answers were around the opportunities it would afford for work: 91% thought it would help them get a good job and 85% thought it would help them go abroad to work. Figures related to study were lower but still very positive: 77% said it would help them to continue their studies, 78% said it would help them to enter a good university or college, 75% said it would help them to go abroad to study, and 69% said it would help them study the subject they wanted at university or college.

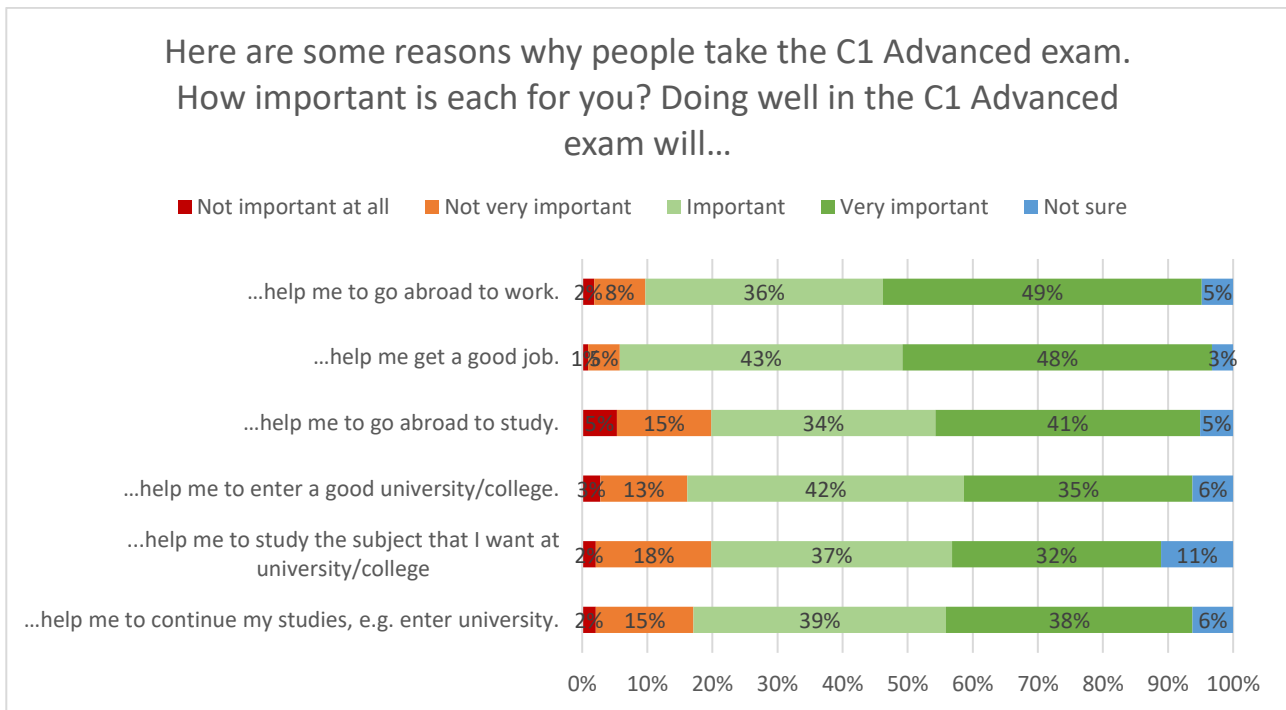


Figure 30: Current student perceptions of how they will use the C1 Advanced qualification in the future

Former students who took the C1 Advanced exam were given a list of options and asked what they have used the qualification for. Responses suggested that it has helped many in their further studies: 34% said that the qualification had helped them continue their studies, 28% said that it had helped them to study the subject that they wanted, 19% reported that it had helped them enter a good university or college, and interestingly, 14% said it had helped them go abroad to study. Figures for work-related use of the C1 Advanced were lower, but the qualification had clearly helped a substantial minority into employment: 18% reported that it had helped them to get a good job, and 8% that it had helped them go abroad to work. Overall, only 15% said that the C1 Advanced qualification had helped them do “none of the above” – or put differently, 85% of students have made use of the qualification in some way.

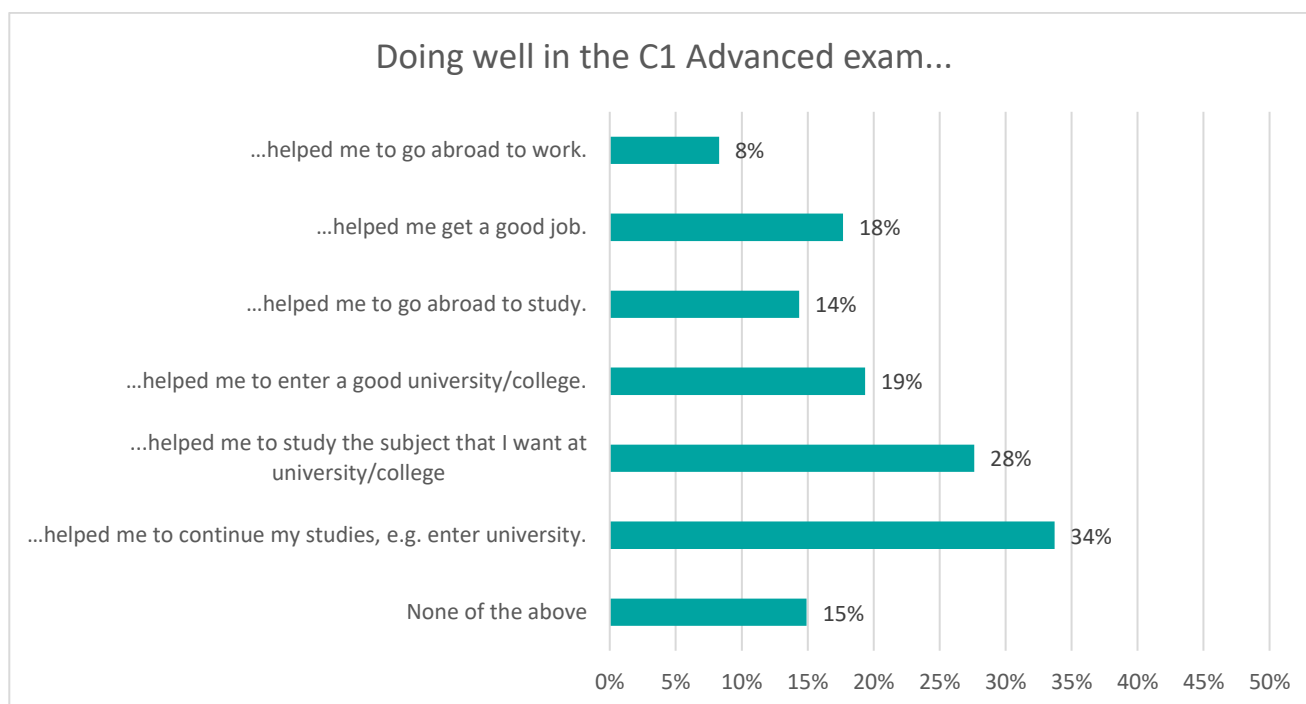


Figure 31: How former students have used the C1 Advanced qualification

Focus groups with both students and former students also suggested that the C1 Advanced qualification was beneficial for students moving into higher education or work. One current student mentioned that the C1 certificate would support their university application:

I want to get a very good level of English because some of the universities I'm looking at, they require at least C1 level to like even apply to them. So it definitely motivates me to get a high level of English there. [Student Focus Group 3, Student 5]

Another current student mentioned that the exam was useful for their goal of studying abroad:

I've also done my research and looked at a few universities in England and a lot of schools too. If you want to enrol in there as an international student, you have to have at least a C1 in English. So I think that. It would be really good, it would be really cool if I got it [C1 Advanced certificate] and I could enrol in somewhere. [Student Focus Group 4, Student 2]

Former students who had taken the C1 Advanced successfully gave some interesting examples of how they had used their certificates. One university student talked about her plans for the future and how the C1 Advanced qualification is helping:

I am applying for schools abroad for, like Berlin, for acting Bachelors [degrees]... And for all the applications, I have to have some sort of proof that, how my English level is, and if I haven't taken the [C1 Advanced] exam it would take so much longer. It's just so much easier right now to just give them the certificates and they already have everything they need. [Interview with former student 1]

Another university student mentioned that they are going to use the certificate to study abroad:

Today I'm going to be presenting my application to go study with Erasmus Plus, so I would like to go to Ireland or Upsala and over there the studying would also be in English... I will be needing to present it [C1 Advanced certificate] so that I can actually apply. [Interview with former student 2]

A student currently based in the UK also explained how she'd used her C1 certificate to enter university and to look for work:

When I was applying for different universities, that's why I used it because some of them they did have the C1 requirements... then in my first year I used it to like apply for jobs... when you come to, you know, a new country as a student, they can be a bit difficult because they don't know what's your English level... So I guess that helped in that sense that they could see that if I can have C1 at the exam, it shows that it's better than, you know, you may expect when you come here over here [to the UK]. [Interview with former student 3]

In summary, teachers, parents, and students all commented positively on the increased opportunities afforded by the C1 Advanced certificate. Around three-quarters of students thought it would help them access higher education either at home or abroad, and the percentage was even higher for those who thought it would help them find a good job or go abroad to work. Teachers and parents were asked about the recognition of the exam with employers and higher education institutions, and although opinions were positive among teachers regarding the amount of recognition given the exam, parents were less convinced, with over half unsure or disagreeing that it was recognised by employers, and around 40% expressing the same sentiment about university recognition.

Former students who had achieved a C1 Advanced certificate reported various uses that they had made of the qualification, with some students giving examples of how it had facilitated their access to university courses and jobs at home and abroad. Only 15% of those surveyed reported that the exam hadn't been useful for them in any of the categories presented.

Discussion

This section is divided by research question with a subsequent analysis and discussion of findings for each.

1. To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonia education system led to increased motivation/engagement among English students?

Data show that students of English in Estonia are motivated by a range of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Although there were strong intrinsic motivations such as accessing media and the internet, there were also many who said that English would help them get a good job or continue their studies. This was also reported as an important part of the engagement and motivation which is provided by the C1 Advanced. Comments in the focus groups focused on how a C1 certificate was useful for applying for university programmes, particularly abroad, and how it helped when looking for work. There were also those who felt that the challenge of the exam and the competition between peers were motivating factors. In addition, there was the unexpected motivation of taking the exam early in the school year which allowed students to concentrate on other subjects.

In sum, data suggested that for many students the opportunity to take the C1 Advanced exam in their final year provided them with extra motivation to achieve a higher level of English (C1 or C2) compared to that of the national exam (B2) for a number of reasons, the main one being the exchange value of the certificate, which can open doors to opportunities both locally and internationally. If we refer back to the ToC posited above (see 'Theory of Change'), in the Activities section, the importance of ensuring strong recognition of the exam for work and study is emphasised.

2. To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonia education system led to improved English teaching practices, e.g. focus on communication, less teacher-centred lessons?

Broadly speaking, teaching in the state system in Estonia seems to follow communicative methodology. Teachers are aware of the importance of making English the principal language of the classroom and how pair and groupwork can be used to give students meaningful opportunities to communicate in the target language.

Data gathered in questionnaires and lesson observations suggested that there was a fairly even split between teacher- and student-centred activities in lessons. In communicative methodology, typically, the proportion of class time would be greater for student-centred in comparison to teacher-centred activities. However, this element of "teacher control" seems to be much more prevalent in English teaching in compulsory education settings where discipline is a key consideration in many cases compared to, for example, private language schools.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the 'Results' section, lesson observations showed that feedback to individuals undertaking pairwork or groupwork was infrequently given in comparison to teachers giving whole-class feedback. There may be a number of reasons for this. One is that in some

classrooms space was tight and the desks were arranged in rows which made it difficult for teachers to circulate comfortably and monitor students while working in pairs or groups. However, it may be that some teachers are less aware of the importance of this kind of feedback.

Regarding the influence of C1 Advanced on the classroom, answers from the questionnaire and focus groups demonstrated that most teachers who prepared students for the exam were positive about how it had changed their teaching. Data showed that the exam was helping teachers to plan lessons, define learning objectives and choose learning activities. These included an increased focus on pair work in speaking practice, the introduction of more advanced vocabulary, more emphasis on formal writing skills and some teachers mentioned how they engage more in close textual reading during class time. All of these activities seem valuable in improving students' English proficiency and their range of communicative skills, e.g. oral interaction and written communication.

However, teachers did report some negative changes to their teaching. The time needed to prepare students to reach the C1 level means that certain activities which teachers and students enjoyed have been dropped, resulting in a narrower curriculum. Possibly, with some creative thinking, many of these "fun" activities could still be used. It may be a question of helping teachers to understand how activities can still provide practice for the skills required by the exam even if not directly emulating the exam task types.

Overall, it would seem that the introduction of the C1 Advanced exam has effected positive change in a teaching system which already had teachers with high levels of both English language and pedagogical skills. In line with the ToC, teachers are preparing students for the kind of communicative activities required by the exam, and focusing on the kind of advanced skills needed at the C1/C2 levels of the CEFR. Indeed, this may be the key difference from before the introduction of the C1 Advanced: teachers now expect more of students and are challenging them through a range of advanced activities to achieve a higher level of English proficiency.

3. To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonia education system led to improved English communication skills for students?

In lieu of data which gives a direct comparison to before and after the implementation of C1 Advanced in the Estonian education system, teachers were asked to evaluate to what extent working towards the exam supported improvements in students' English. The findings showed that the majority of teachers thought that students' English improved more than usual when studying for the exam and that this was driven by the focus on a higher level (C1) than when studying for the state exam (B2). This is congruent with learning theory that holds that student attainment can be positively influenced by challenging students and ensuring that they have the support to reach their learning objectives. Schleicher (2018), when analysing performance in PISA tests, reports that countries in which students are required to take standards-based external examinations do significantly better than those that do not. The implication is that striving to meet these standards leads to positive washback on teaching and learning.

As mentioned above in the Results section, students preparing for the C1 Advanced were particularly keen to improve their English speaking skills. In contrast, listening and reading were the skills students were least interested in improving. These results are interesting when compared to the C1 Advanced results profile in Estonia (see Figure 18 in the 'Results' section for a breakdown of recent results by skill), in which Reading consistently comes out as the weakest skill, and Listening and Speaking as the two strongest. Of course, students' desire to improve certain skills is related to their motivation for learning, e.g. communicating with others either online or when travelling abroad, but it suggests that students aren't so aware of the need to improve their receptive skills, particularly Reading. It is worth noting that in a piece of research carried out by Cambridge English, reading was rated as the most important English skill by employers in non-English speaking countries (Cambridge English, 2016). It is therefore important to make sure that students are developing their reading alongside the other skills in their communicative repertoire.

In keeping with outcomes stated in the ToC, it seems that the introduction of the C1 Advanced is helping to improve students' English communicative skills in part through the setting of a higher standard of achievement and the focus on reaching this. Students seem most motivated to improve their speaking skills, but this may be to the detriment of other areas of communicative proficiency, particularly reading.

4. To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonia education system led to more students achieving a C1 or above English level on graduation?

One of the long-term outcomes stated in the ToC is for more students to achieve a certificated level of C1/C2. Data from the C1 Advanced exam (see Appendix 1 and the section 'Performance of C1 Advanced candidates in Estonia' above) show that from 2019, when the exam was introduced into the education system in Estonia, until the end of 2023, 16,802 candidates in Estonia achieved a certificate validating their English level at C1 or C2 (an average of 3,360 per year). For comparison, in the four years prior to that (2015–2018), a total of 3,357 achieved a C1 or C2 (an average of 839 per year).

For further comparison, in 2018, the final year before C1 Advanced was integrated into the school system, 1048 students in Estonia achieved a C1 or C2 certificate. In contrast, in academic year 2022/23, 4,066 students achieved a C1 or C2 level, which is just over half of the final-year student population³.

Clearly, then, more students are graduating from school with a certificate which validates their English at C1 or above since the exam was introduced into the education system.

In addition, the percentage of students achieving C1/C2 has risen, which, along with the increase in candidature, suggests that the English language level among the student population is improving. Although this cannot be directly attributed to the C1 Advanced, it is a reasonable assumption that the exam has played a part.

³ Data on final-year student population in Estonia taken from: www.hm.ee/en/ministry/statistics-and-analysis#vocational-education

5. To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced into the Estonia education system improved academic and employment opportunities for those who achieved a C1 or above English level?

Both teachers and parents commented positively on the increased opportunities afforded by the C1 Advanced certificate. However, many parents were not convinced that the qualification was accepted widely in Estonia: over half were not sure or disagreed that it was recognised by employers, and around 40% expressed the same sentiment about university recognition. Therefore, although both groups were strongly positive about the positive impact that the qualification had on students' opportunities after finishing school, it is clear that there would be benefit in further publicising the exam and what it means to achieve a level of C1/C2. This work would probably be two-fold: seeking formal recognition from higher education institutions and employers, and then communicating this recognition to key stakeholders – students, parents and teachers.

Students were very positive about the opportunities the C1 Advanced qualification afforded them, with around three-quarters saying it would help them access higher education either at home or abroad, and the percentage was even higher for those who thought it would help them find a good job or go abroad to work. Former students who had taken the C1 Advanced in previous years reported a range of actual uses including studying or working both locally and abroad, with only 15% saying that it hadn't been useful for them in any of the categories presented. Comments in the interviews also backed this up with some saying that they had used the qualification to facilitate application to university and college courses in other countries and that it had helped them work abroad.

It seems that, as posited as a long-term outcome in the ToC, and in keeping with the Republic of Estonia's stated goal of promoting the academic mobility of Estonian residents (see 'Strategic Goal 1' in the *National Education Strategy 2021–2035* (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, 2021)), performing to the target level or above in the C1 Advanced exam does enhance the opportunities that students have, particularly facilitating their chances of studying abroad. However, as mentioned, it would seem that more benefits would accrue if the advantages of the exam were communicated more widely in Estonia, particularly in terms of the qualification being recognised by employers and higher education institutions.

Limitations of this study

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, regarding the quantitative data gathered, response biases have been identified in self-report surveys such as these, which can mean that the level of agreement with statements from respondents can be inflated (termed 'acquiescence bias', see Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, responses to the quantitative, Likert-scale items from the surveys administered for this project should be treated cautiously when drawing conclusions.

Secondly, when seeking to answer Research Question 3: *To what extent has the introduction of C1 Advanced to the Estonia education system led to improved English communication skills for students?*, no baseline data was collected prior to the incorporation of the C1 Advanced in the education system in Estonia. Therefore, no objective comparison of levels of proficiency (e.g. exam scores) can be made between the before and after of C1 Advanced to judge whether student English levels have changed.

As mentioned above, all schools and participants in this study were selected using purposive (non-random) sampling (Galloway, 2005). Although several variables were taken into account when choosing participants, this does not mean that the sample was fully representative. Therefore, any generalising from data needs to be done cautiously.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The most important conclusion which can be drawn from the findings in this study is that all stakeholder groups were very positive about the benefits of having C1 Advanced as part of the education system in Estonia. Students, former students, parents/guardians and teachers were all convinced that the exam had brought benefits in terms of things such as motivation to learn, English proficiency level, improved teaching practices and opportunities afforded by the certificate.

In many ways the most important group of stakeholders when it comes to assessing the impact of an exam, the majority of teachers felt that their teaching had been influenced in (mainly) positive ways, and that the C1 Advanced was helping to drive up standards in both teaching and learning – the proof being that more students were achieving a C1/C2 level of English.

However, successful as the incorporation of the exam appears to have been, some areas were identified which could be improved to enhance teaching, learning and exam impact:

Monitoring and feedback

The Estonian education system benefits from having well trained teachers with a good level of English. They are well versed in using communicative methodology, make sure English is the language of the classroom, understand the importance of a growth mindset and developing learner independence, and are confident in their planning and delivery of lessons. However, based on lesson observations, one area that could be improved is monitoring and feedback, particularly of pair and group work. Providing feedback is a critical element of high-quality teaching (Hattie, 2009), and with the goal of developing that skill in teachers, it is recommended that teachers are offered the opportunity for professional development in that area.

Focus on reading skills

Students' weakest area of proficiency in the C1 Advanced exam is Reading. Some teachers mention that they have begun to work more on this area with close textual analysis activities. It would be beneficial for both students and teachers to be made aware of this, and also the importance of having strong reading skills (see comments in Discussion section above). Again, it may be that some professional development for teachers could help here – teaching reading is quite a specialised skill so it is probable that many teachers would benefit from some support in this area.

Creating teaching material to engage learners

Some teachers commented that they had had to cut some more “fun” activities out of their classes due to the time required to prepare students for the C1 Advanced exam. However, the C1 Advanced is a test of general English proficiency and it may be that many of these engaging activities could be exploited to provide practice in the skills tested by the exam. It could be that for some teachers there is a skills gap here, and therefore some workshops on materials development with a focus on exam

preparation might be useful. Furthermore, it would be beneficial if there was a forum for teachers to share successful lesson plans and activities with their colleagues from around the country. This could take the form of a community of practice that meets online a few times a year to share ideas and perhaps an online platform where teachers can upload material for their colleagues to access.

Recognition for the C1 Advanced exam

Many parents are unsure of the recognition that is afforded the C1 Advanced exam in both the higher education sector and also businesses. This is probably for two reasons. Firstly, formal recognition is not widespread, particularly among employers. Secondly, the recognition has not been well communicated to stakeholders, parents included. Therefore, a beneficial piece of work would be to seek formal recognition from higher education institutions and employers, and then communicate this recognition to key stakeholders – students, parents and teachers.

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Appendix 1

Table 3: Candidates in Estonia who achieved a C1/C2 by year

Year	No. of candidates who achieved C1/C2 in Estonia
2015	626
2016	716
2017	967
2018	1048
2019	2221
2020	3000
2021	3557
2022	4129
2023	3895

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