

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Lanesboro Community College,
Lanesboro, Co Longford.
Roll number: 71720L**

Date of inspection: 20 October 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S E O L A Í O C H T A | A N D S C I E N C E**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection as part of a whole-school evaluation (WSE) in Lanesboro Community College, Lanesboro, Co Longford. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Irish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and to the subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Timetabled provision for teaching and learning Irish in the school is supportive in so far as students have good contact with the language. Irish is part of the subject taster programme which operates in first year until the mid-term break at the end of October. During this period two lessons per week are timetabled. It is recommended that these arrangements be reviewed and a daily input be provided for each class group from the beginning of first year. Classes in first year are of mixed ability and from second year onwards students are allocated to class groups corresponding to the levels in the state examinations. The vast majority of classes are timetabled concurrently to facilitate student movement between the different examination levels. When students are considering changing levels, discussions take place between teachers, students and parents or guardians. It is recommended that procedures be established to provide more formal management for students who wish to move to a level more appropriate for their ability. This would be supportive of teachers who give students every encouragement to undertake higher level for as long as possible during the cycle.

All teachers involved in teaching and learning Irish in the school are graduates in the subject. School management supports the attendance of all teachers at in-service courses organised by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). It is recommended that teachers of Irish, as a department, discuss the information derived from these courses and other sources and analyse their experiences in the classroom of using the methods recommended. In this way the department will identify collaboratively teaching and learning techniques appropriate to their own context. The vast majority of teachers have an opportunity to teach both cycles and all examination levels. However, at the time of the evaluation visit, one teacher had not yet taught the senior cycle higher level. It is advisable that these classes would not be the responsibility of particular teachers and that every teacher would have the opportunity to gain competence in teaching the Leaving Certificate higher level.

The majority of teachers of Irish have their own designated classrooms. These rooms are well equipped with information and communications technology (ICT) resources and all classrooms have broadband access. There is ready access to data projectors, overhead projectors, laptop

computers, television sets and DVDs. Plans for the installation of digital projectors in each classroom were underway at the time of the inspection. It is recommended that the department plan to further integrate ICT into the teaching and learning of the language. Although the school has a library, there are no up-to-date Irish language books available there. It is recommended that the library be developed and the SLSS and www.cogg.ie websites used as reference points. A list could be drawn up and a collection of resources in Irish compiled systematically which would support teaching and learning in the language.

Ten per cent of students have an exemption from studying Irish. The majority of these students received their early education outside the state.

Irish is evident throughout the school environment: signage as well as the names of different classrooms is displayed in Irish. The school's philosophy statement '*Ar Aghaidh le Chéile*' is written in Irish. Those teachers are to be congratulated who make every effort to promote Irish culture both within and outside the school through the provision of a range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities for students. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is an important occasion on the school's calendar. Students in certain year groups attend Irish drama productions.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish department has been established in the school for a number of years and teachers meet formally once a term. Minutes of meetings are maintained as part of the Irish subject plan. A department coordinator has been selected and role responsibilities developed accordingly. However the position of coordinator is not rotated. It is recommended that members of the department agree a change of representative to ensure continuity from the point of view of objectives for the development of the department and so that every member would obtain experience and understanding of the responsibilities inherent in coordinating the work of the department. To support the formal contact, teachers also meet regularly on an informal basis.

Good work has been achieved in certain areas of the subject plan. The aims and objectives of the department place particular emphasis on Irish as a living language. Teaching objectives for the department have been set out in the form of learning outcomes for students. This practice is commended and it is recommended that these learning outcomes serve as a framework for planning for teaching, learning and assessment.

Teachers are congratulated on the strong links they have established with the learning-support department. In the case of cross-curricular links, it would be beneficial to establish connections with the other languages taught in the school in order to discuss and exchange effective teaching and learning methods with teachers of the other languages. Such links would be most beneficial in fostering whole-school learning experiences for all languages, a development which would enhance teaching and learning together.

In the current school year curricular plans have been developed for all year groups. It is to be commended that common work programmes have been agreed for the first term in second and fifth years for those students who move from higher to ordinary level. Considerable variation was evident in these plans both in the amount of information contained and the various templates used by different teachers. Best practice was evident where planning was carried out to teach the language in a thematic and integrated manner across the different aspects of the syllabuses in keeping with the approach recommended in the Irish syllabuses. This approach is more helpful for students in acquiring the language because of the interdependent and mutually supportive

relationship that exists between the skills. Teaching topics, timeframes and resources are identified in the plans. It is recommended that these plans be developed as a template for the department and that student learning outcomes, methodologies and assessment methods also be outlined. Examples of this form of integrated planning are available in *Treoirlínte mar thaca le Múineadh an Chúrsa Leasaithe Litríochta* published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and contained in the Irish department's planning documentation. This approach is recommended to every member of the team.

It is recommended also that an action plan be devised in order to ensure the strategic development of the department. The recommendations contained in this report and the priorities of the Irish department should form an integral part of this plan. In addition a certain timeframe should be allocated to the action plan, as well as nominating members of the department to effect the objectives. Regular review of the work of the department is recommended and the outcomes of the review should be recorded in the subject plan.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Short-term planning and preparation had been completed by all teachers for the lessons observed. On the whole, a clear link was evident with student prior learning from previous lessons and a developmental sequence in the stages of the lessons observed. All teachers shared the learning objectives with students, either orally or in writing on the board, at the beginning of lessons and as the learning sections changed. Teachers are commended for their dedication. Three recommendations are made concerning short-term planning: learning objectives should be differentiated to provide scaffolding for students to whom language learning does not come readily and also to provide challenge for more able students; with these differentiated objectives as a framework, a debriefing session should be held with students at the end of class to identify what learning has been achieved and how they accomplished that learning; it would also be beneficial to choose the number of teaching and learning objectives according to the length of the class periods, in this way one objective would be achieved before undertaking the next. All teachers were well prepared for their lessons. Teachers had prepared authentic learning materials in the form of worksheets or PowerPoint slides. Other authentic resources which enhanced teaching and learning included listening comprehension extracts and key vocabulary, pictures, maps, jigsaw puzzles made from verses of a poem and a theatre notice. It is most important to ensure that the Irish contained in learning materials made available as exemplars to students is accurate.

Good variety was evident in classes where language skills were integrated, based on particular themes. In one class, an effective questioning session was conducted before and after a listening task, giving a good insight into the level of student understanding of the listening segment. In another class, a recording of a poem was used. However, the listening did not involve the same definite objectives and no pre-skill work was carried out to enable students to access the poem across the range of proficiency in the class group. It is recommended that listening exercises have specific objectives, that pre-listening work be carried out and that, while they are completing the task, the needs of students are accommodated. Good balance was achieved in other lessons where there was a reasonable mixture of questions between student and teacher and students asking each other questions. Written work, in pairs, reinforced some of the vocabulary which had been done orally. It is recommended that tasks for pair work or for individual student work be introduced by means of a sample task which would provide students with a better understanding of what they are being asked to achieve. It would also be useful to determine, in advance, a precise time period for the task so that student work has a worthwhile pace from the point of view of participation. It

is also recommended that a designated task be available for those students who succeed in accomplishing the core task before the allocated time is finished.

In the majority of classes, it was customary to ask students to read without any preparation work on vocabulary or the phonetics of the text. It is recommended that this approach be reviewed so that such a task does not have a negative influence on the learner's level of intrinsic motivation and so that further learning possibilities will be provided for the student who is reading and for the others who are listening. In some classes, the principal teaching and learning method was questioning. This approach was most successful when the majority of students participated in the lesson. It is recommended that, as an alternative approach to interaction between teacher and students, students are set to work in pairs which would provide opportunities for learners to practise together their language production and assimilation skills. In general, it is recommended that teachers should not be overly dependent on directing broad and differentiated questions at specific students when posing questions to students. In this way students with the highest level of proficiency will not be answering too many of the questions.

Irish was used in all class communications. This practice is commended as frequently the teacher is the sole model students have for phonetics and correct use of language. Overall, students had a good standard of Irish as well as a good understanding of the subject and they willingly used the target language when given the opportunity. Good routine practices were in evidence regarding the acquisition of Irish. The date, class work and homework were recorded in student copybooks on a daily basis. In another class, during roll call, students confirmed their attendance by giving the name of a county. These approaches are commended as students return again and again to the vocabulary in the syllabuses. The wider use of such techniques which enhance students' deep learning is recommended. In the lessons observed, it was evident that students knew some of the vocabulary required to express themselves. Teachers who develop this approach are to be congratulated. Grammar and student awareness of grammatical terminology formed a part of the vast majority of classes. It was customary for the majority of teachers to write new words in order to illustrate meaning or to strengthen spelling capacity. In one class, students were frequently asked to spell the word themselves. During classes, all teachers provided good oral simplifications of vocabulary as it arose. Teachers who use these effective techniques are to be congratulated and these techniques should be included in the practice of every member of the department. While these practices are to be commended, it was evident however, in some copybooks and in a random sample of textbooks, that the translation method is also in use. Long passages of English should not be evident in Irish copybooks as ability in language syntax is essential for student competence in every language skill. It is recommended that, as a department, teachers discuss the use of the mother tongue in the teaching of Irish.

An atmosphere of mutual respect and enthusiasm was evident in the lessons observed in the course of the evaluation visit. All teachers displayed good classroom management. Teachers had good knowledge of the students in their care which enhanced the teaching and learning interaction. In all cases, students received encouraging affirmation for their efforts and for the opinions they offered.

A stimulating learning environment had been created in the rooms where teachers are principally based. Poetry, grammar charts and other posters were displayed. This approach is to be commended as it provides a physical reinforcement of the language proficiency of students. It is recommended that the Irish department discuss the range of vocabulary which students require to ask questions, make requests and outline difficulties in the target language during Irish lessons. It would be worthwhile to display this special vocabulary on wall charts and these charts should be changed regularly. In this way, each year group would learn a store of useful words every year.

Charts should be accurate and easily legible. In addition to having learning and teaching material displayed, it is also very important to have accurate work sheets available.

ASSESSMENT

Students taking certificate examinations have a summative examination after the mid-term break in October and mock examinations in the spring. Students in other year groups also have summative examinations twice yearly. Reports based on these summative examinations are sent home. It is recommended that the different language skills be included in this summative assessment for every year group and that parents or guardians are informed of student achievement across all the language skills.

A range of formative assessment methods is used in class to monitor the learning process and student progress. These include correction of student homework on a daily basis, tests at the end of topics and end-of-term tests. Effective formative strategies were observed in the course of the evaluation visit. Students were involved in oral questioning, pair work and individual work as well as being well supported while completing their written tasks.

Appropriately, all students in the school use a homework diary. The year head manages the homework diaries and parents sign the diary every week. Both teachers and parents also use the diary as a channel of communication. In some diaries, students recorded their homework task in Irish or bilingually. These approaches are to be commended. A random sample of diaries examined showed that homework is being assigned regularly and that there was sufficient emphasis on writing, rote learning and revision work. Guidelines for Irish homework form part of the subject plan and it is recommended that these guidelines be further developed to ensure variety across all the language skills in the homework task. This approach would reinforce student competence in all the skills instead of giving priority to any one skill and the assessment experience would be in keeping with the recommendations made above for teaching and learning and with the recommendation of the syllabuses.

It was evident, from the random sample of copybooks examined, that a good range of work which reflects the syllabus requirements has been completed. It was not evident in all the copybooks however, that the courses were being taught in an integrated thematic manner. Examples of correction which focused on grammar or spelling mistakes were evident in student work and the correct form of the word or spelling was written. In a small number of copybooks, developmental correction gave clear assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of composition work, including substantial passages. In the vast majority of copybooks, student work was being monitored only. It is recommended that this deficiency be reviewed immediately. In addition, it is recommended that the Irish department discuss the value of the learning to be gained from corrections, including developmental corrections. More information is available on assessment for learning on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. The guidelines on homework contained in the Irish plan should be amended, based on the outcomes of this debate and research.

The analysis and tracking which management carries out on the results achieved by students in the certificate examinations are to be commended. The department also compares these results with the national norms on an annual basis and examines the numbers of students taking higher level in both cycles. It is recommended that the department, as a priority, plan to devise strategies to enhance the achievement level of students.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetabled provision for teaching and learning Irish is good for the majority of year groups.
- The school has good facilities which impact positively on teaching and learning the language.
- Effective teaching and learning methods were in use in the vast majority of lessons observed during the evaluation visit.
- Good procedures have been established for assessment and homework.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the current arrangement for Irish in the subject taster programme in first year be reviewed and a daily input timetabled for every year group.
- It is recommended that the teaching objectives of the department, which have been identified as learning objectives for students across the language skills, serve as a framework for collaborative planning, for teaching and learning and for assessment. It is also recommended that an action plan be devised to guide the collaborative development of the department.
- It is recommended that teachers reflect on their own practice in the classroom and that the outcomes of this consideration be used as a basis for discussion on methodologies at department level and among all language teachers.
- It is recommended that all the language skills be included in the summative and formative assessment of students. The Irish department should also develop approaches to provide developmental corrections of student work.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.