Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Scoil Chríost Rí, Presentation College
Portlaoise, Co. Laois
Roll number: 63451O

Date of inspection: 4 February 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Chríost Rí, Presentation College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning of Irish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

Very good provision is made for Irish and it is well supported in Scoil Chríost Rí, Presentation College. Irish is in evidence in the school environment, on doors, on the electronic notice board inside the main door and in use by a member of staff in the reception office also. The school management indicated that the school will be moving to a new building on a fresh location at the end of the current school year and the management should ensure that the prominence of Irish is taken into account when planning for day-to-day school administration in the new building.

The four teachers on the Irish teaching team have Irish in their degrees and their competence in oral Irish for the purposes of teaching is satisfactory. The management makes every effort to ensure continuity for teachers when scheduling their classes in both cycles. Besides, it is clear from the timetables that they are given experience of teaching the subject in the different programmes and levels in turn. The management is commended for this, because it is a vital part of the teachers’ professional development that their implementation of the various syllabuses to the level of the certificate examinations be developed.

The students are allocated to mixed-ability classes in first year, a praiseworthy practice. Their allocation to streamed classes for Irish in the remainder of junior cycle is based on their achievements in a common examination set at the end of first year. There is one class group in Transition Year (TY), an optional programme in the school. In accord with the philosophy of the programme, the TY class is a mixed-ability group. The students are allocated to streamed classes, based on subject examination levels in the first and second year of the Leaving Certificate. The management is commended for timetabling second, third and fifth year Irish classes simultaneously. This facilitates student access to Irish at the level which best suits their needs, should they need to change classes.

The majority of the students take ordinary level Irish for the certificate examinations. A small percentage attempt higher level and a very low percentage take the foundation level in both
cycles. It is an agreed aim of the teachers of Irish and of the management to increase the number of students taking higher level Irish in the certificate examinations.

The time allocation for Irish in the programmes offered in senior cycle is very good. Four class periods per week are provided for students in two years of junior cycle and a fifth weekly period is provided in one year of the cycle. The management is commended for providing this fifth period and it is evident that the management recognises the importance of providing it to consolidate students’ learning before they move to senior cycle. Although the management is commended for the distribution of the class periods throughout the week, because it provides a regular input of the language for the students, nevertheless, it is evident from the timetable that a certain class has Irish in the last class period of the day on three days each week. It is recommended that management, when planning the timetable, avoids such an arrangement.

The management recognises the importance of continuous professional development of teachers and they are encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities that arise. The teachers have attended various workshops organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish. Besides, one of the teachers of Irish, in partnership with other teachers in the school, is taking part in an initiative based on Assessment for Learning (AfL) with National University of Ireland Maynooth for the school year 2009/10. This teacher reports back to the Irish teaching team and to the whole-school staff. This is good practice. The management is commended for the reporting template they have developed for teachers who attend professional development events and their inclusion in the subject plan.

Opportunities are created for all the students to participate in activities, outside the formal Irish classes, related to the Irish language and culture. As part of this work, a programme of different events is run during Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Week) and it was intended to take second year students on a visit to the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht before the end of the current school year. The teachers of Irish deserve particular commendation for preparing debating teams to take part in local and national competitions, such as those run by Gael Linn, for example.

A good provision of resources and aids is available for the teaching and learning of Irish. Almost every teacher is classroom based and there is storage space for resources in one of these. Besides, they have started to use a shared electronic folder to store and share resources such as worksheets, a commendable development. Teachers have access to a laptop and data projector for use in classrooms. It was reported that a computer and data projector will be available in every teaching area in the new school, as well as an interactive whiteboard in some of them. Taking these developments into account, it is recommended that the staff continue to develop their skills in the use of technology and that there should be a particular emphasis on students’ use of technology as a learning tool. There is no library in the school at present, but it was reported that there will be one in the new building. It is recommended that the teachers augment the small supply of reading material in Irish available at present and that its use and maintenance be included in the subject planning process.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The department of Irish is established on a formal basis and the teachers take turns acting as co-ordinator for the department. It is recommended that this term be of two years duration, allowing the co-ordinator to agree certain work-targets with regard to subject planning and development and the setting of an action plan, as well as handling the normal administration of the department. The school follows the good practice of setting out, in consultation with management, an agenda for each of the formal meetings of the department and of keeping minutes of those meetings. Among the topics in the minutes, which the department deserves particular commendation for discussing, are methodologies and feedback from a professional development event attended by a member of the department. It is recommended that, at their regular meetings, the teachers take the opportunity of discussing teaching and learning methodologies and strategies. To help them share good practice, teachers should visit one another’s classrooms for peer observation. Such practice would be useful to them in developing skills in the use of ICT as a teaching and learning medium, for example. It is recommended that management includes extra prompts on the feedback form to encourage teachers to reflect further on how their learning as part of their professional development could benefit the teaching and learning in Scoil Chríost Rí.

The department’s plan for Irish was made available and it contained documents relevant to various aspects of the subject provision, among them the syllabuses. The content plan for the different year groups which was made available was of a poor standard. Plans for individual year groups constituted a list of topics, of literary texts as appropriate, with references to grammar, set out term-by-term. It is recommended that the development of a comprehensive plan for the teaching and learning of the subject in both cycles, including TY, be expedited. For this purpose, it is recommended that a template laid out on a term-by-term basis, which would specify the subject-matter, the language functions and skills, the expected learning outcomes, the teaching and learning methodologies and strategies to be employed, as well as the aids, resources and assessment methods to be used. An account of the methodologies and strategies should be compiled for inclusion in the plan, which would pay particular attention to differentiation and to the thematic integration in the development of language skills. There was no evidence available of planning documentation for individual classes. Such plans should be based on the overall subject plan. Teachers are reminded that the subject plans are working documents and that any monitoring or review undertaken on those plans should be noted in them.

Very good preparation had been done for the classes observed. Particularly praiseworthy were those cases in which resources, among them resources developed using ICT, had been prepared, which would facilitate differentiation of learning and which took account of the aids.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teaching and learning of Irish was of good quality. The roll was called and responses made in Irish at the outset of every class. The aims of the lessons were communicated to the students and written on the whiteboard. This is good practice and particularly praiseworthy was the case where the expected learning outcomes were also shared with the students and where language was used which made them aware of the learning they would have accomplished, or what they themselves would be able to do, by the end of class. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all classes in order to give the students a better understanding of their learning and to help their development as independent learners.
Various methodologies and strategies were used in all the classes to present the content and to encourage the students to take an active part in their learning and these aims were very effectively implemented in most cases. A few examples were observed of well-organised pair work and group work. In these cases the students were given a clear task to accomplish, group members were allocated specific roles, a time limit was set for the task and feedback was collected. Grammatical mistakes being made by students when giving feedback should be noted and the most regular common errors corrected. The students should play a role in this work by, for example, affording them the opportunity of identifying and correcting the mistakes as part of the development of their language awareness. Attention should also be paid to developing their phonetic accuracy and this element should be included in the planning for first year. Reading and listening texts being used in class could be utilised to great advantage to develop students' understanding of grammar, as well as its explicit teaching, and to develop their accuracy of pronunciation. In some cases where students were working in pairs they had to question one another. This approach is commended because it helps to develop their confidence in taking an active part in a conversation. An example of the use of drama was also observed and students were encouraged to read the text dramatically. It is recommended that drama be more widely used to support learning.

The examples observed of the teaching of literature showed creativity and the material was very effectively linked to the students’ own experience, which helped them to identify with it. Two very good examples were also observed of listening texts being used, as well as comprehensive oral discussion, to support the development of students’ understanding of literature in the senior classes. Particularly commendable was the use of a recording of a song to illustrate the metre to the students. The links created between a prose extract and a song on the same course, in another case, were also praiseworthy. In yet another case, very effective use was made of a PowerPoint presentation to present images in a poem to the students and to help them consolidate their learning.

In one class observed, the teaching was not focused on all the students and, as a result, not every student completed the class activities. A very good example of differentiated learning was observed in another case. In this case, effective use was made of questioning, students were assigned different roles, including the teacher’s role according to their language ability, and homework, too, was differentiated. This good practice should be extended, always keeping in mind that every student in the class is entitled to tuition.

Most of the students took an active part in the work: it was evident that they have a positive relationship with the teachers and that the students were making satisfactory progress in their learning. The use of the target language as the language of instruction and as the normal language of communication in all classes was very good. By posing questions to the teachers on lesson content and by explaining absences from class in Irish, for example, the students illustrated that this was their usual experience. In one case, and keeping in mind that the students are at different levels of language acquisition, the teacher must remember to speak at a pace supportive of student learning.

The very good use the teachers had made of the walls of the classrooms where they are based, to create an environment supportive of students’ language learning, is commended. Particularly impressive were the exhibitions of students’ own work and the posters they had created based on literature, for example.
ASSESSMENT

The teachers of Irish implement the school’s homework policy. At the time of the evaluation, there was neither a whole-school policy nor a department of Irish written assessment policy. It was reported that a wide range of assessment methods is used. However, not all of them are used in the case of every class or year group. For example, assessment of oral Irish, peer-assessment and self-assessment are not practised in the case of all classes. One example of peer-assessment was observed during the visit. As part of self-assessment and to link the class work more closely to the planning recommended regarding the sharing of expected learning outcomes with students, a few moments should be set aside at the end of class to ask the students to reflect on what they have learnt and how they learned it. Questions should be asked to guide this reflection. It is recommended that, on a whole-school basis, an assessment policy be developed that would be linked to the homework policy and would cater for the needs of the four main language skills that must be developed. As part of this, the homework policy should be emended, to take account of listening skills also. This would afford opportunities for the teachers to base homework on radio or television programmes, news or weather forecasts on TG4 or RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, for example. Assessment practice which would take account of the development of learning in the main language skills would ensure the implementation of the aims and objectives of the syllabuses. Examples of students’ school diaries were reviewed. There is scope for using these more effectively, especially in junior cycle.

Common end-of-year examinations are set for first years and it was reported that the same applies where, for example, there are two classes taking ordinary level in second year. It is good practice to use common examinations, and marking schemes can be agreed and scripts exchanged, even, as part of this practice. In first year, students’ achievements in the Christmas test are based on continuous assessment and on a class-based examination. To monitor the students’ progress and the implementation of the subject plan for first year more closely, common tests should be set for them at various stages throughout the year. This would allow for review and making appropriate emendations at important junctures throughout the school year. Continuous assessment of students’ learning is conducted in Transition Year. This is good practice.

Written work is well organised in the majority of cases, with separate copybooks for different aspects of the work. Examples of students’ work indicated that an appropriate range of subject-matter has been covered. The work had been regularly corrected and grades, marks or notes of commendation written on the students’ efforts. The teachers of Irish are advised to agree a common correction practice, based on AfL, and to take account of the experience the department has already gained in this area in developing it. Based on the principles of AfL, the students should get recognition for what they have done well or correctly, should be made aware of gaps in their learning, and should be given guidance on how they might improve their work.

Students’ achievements in the Leaving Certificate are analysed and compared with the national averages. This is good practice. It is recommended that it be extended to the Junior Certificate and to the house examinations and that the results of any analysis be taken into account in planning and monitoring of plans throughout the year.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
• Very good provision is made for Irish and it is well supported. It is in evidence in the school environment and is well provided for on the school timetable.
• Students are allocated to mixed-ability classes in first year.
• The management recognises the importance of the continuous professional development of teachers and the staff are encouraged to take advantage of available opportunities.
• The teaching and learning of Irish was of good quality.
• In all classes observed, various methodologies and strategies were used to present the subject matter and to encourage the students’ active participation in their learning.
• There was a creative approach to the teaching of literature in the examples observed and the subject-matter was very effectively linked to the students’ own experience, which helped them to identify with it.
• Irish was used as the language of instruction and as the normal language of communication in all the classrooms.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• It is recommended that management avoids timetabling arrangements, as occurs in the case of one class group, which result in the majority of the Irish classes available to a group taking place in the last period of the day.
• It is recommended that the work on developing a comprehensive plan for the teaching and learning of the subject in both cycles, including TY, be expedited.
• It is recommended that the practice observed in one case of sharing the expected learning outcomes with the students at the start of class be extended.
• It is recommended that differentiation in teaching and learning be extended to all classes.
• It is recommended that account be taken of all the language skills when assessing students’ work and that an approach to correction based on AfL be agreed and implemented.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.