

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**Ardcoil Rís  
North Circular Road, Limerick  
Roll number: 64201T**

**Date of inspection: 20 September 2010**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

**REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ardscoil Rís. 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 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 and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers. 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**

Students' high standard in Irish equated well with their competence in the subject and many of them displayed a positive attitude towards the language. They are to be commended for their efforts to gain proficiency in the language and their teachers are also to be commended for supporting them.

The school timetable supports the teaching and learning of Irish by providing for regular contact with the target language. Third-year, fifth-year and sixth-year students have daily contact with the language, a provision that is particularly commendable.

Irish is currently taught by five teachers who have varied teaching experience. It is fortunate to have such variety among the members of the department because it creates opportunities for the integration of new strategies with practices already established in Irish classes. The importance of ongoing professional development is recognised, and training workshops on various themes are organised for the school staff. During the current year the school is participating in *Learning Schools Project* under the guidance of the *Limerick Education Centre*. It is intended that, on a pilot basis, a group of teachers will investigate and trial Assessment for Learning strategies and will subsequently extend Assessment for Learning to every class. It is believed that this initiative, which has special significance, will greatly benefit the teachers and the learners of Irish in the future. In respect of Irish, teachers who wish to attend inservice workshops being organised by the *Second Level Support Service* for Irish are supported. Those teachers who attach importance to the ongoing development of their skills are commended. Many new strategies are emerging to meet the challenge of teaching Irish in the modern context, and the inservice workshops provide an opportunity to consider and discuss the value of these strategies. Teachers are also reminded

of night-time workshops which are being organised locally and which focus on specific aspects of the teaching and learning of Irish.

Thirty students are exempt from the study of Irish. This figure represents 4% of the school's total student cohort. Eleven of these students received their early education abroad and the remaining students have learning difficulties. Where it is feasible, learning support is provided to students with learning difficulties while the Irish classes are taking place. Particular credit is due to two students who are eligible for an exemption but have decided to undertake the study of Irish. The support being provided by their teachers in this regard is also acknowledged.

First-year and Transition Year (TY) classes are of mixed ability, an arrangement which accords with best practice. In other year groups, two ability bands are formed. At junior-cycle level, mixed-ability classes are formed within these bands with the exception of a special 'ordinary-level' class which is formed for the students of lowest ability. In the case of students undertaking the Leaving Certificate Programme, mixed-ability classes are formed within the 'ordinary level' band and a system of setting according to ability is implemented within the 'higher level' band. While it is clear that the school has worked out a system of class organisation that it considers to meet its needs, it is recommended that this system be kept under review. At the feedback meeting with management and the teachers of Irish, recommendations with regard to ability grouping in the Inspectorate publication *Looking at Irish at Junior Cycle* were mentioned. With regard to senior-cycle, the school is asked to ensure a system of class organisation that adequately stretches all students and motivates them to study Irish at the highest level in accordance with their ability.

At the time of the inspection the school building was being refurbished and another building was being newly built. The school community has been waiting for a long time for a new school building furnished with modern resources. It is planned to provide teachers with dedicated rooms which will enable them to have easier access to information and communication technology (ICT) resources. In addition, it will enable them to create a stimulating learning atmosphere as well as to accumulate and store their own resources. When they are furnishing their classrooms later on, teachers are reminded of the importance of arranging the desks in a manner which facilitates communication between students: for example a layout comprising three sides of a square/rectangle.

Co- and extra-curricular activities are organised to promote Irish. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is a major event in the school's calendar when art, debating, tongue-twister and creative-writing competitions are organised as well as quizzes and bingo. TY students organise and direct all of the activities and the preparations commence early in the school year. TY students accept many responsibilities and this work is an effective way for developing their organisational, team, interpersonal and communication skills. It was also reported that many students spend periods in the Gaeltacht during the summer and the school management is to be commended for providing support through scholarships. A *Cumann Gaelach* has been established this year and it is intended that those students and teachers who have an interest in Irish will come together on a weekly basis. This development is welcomed since it will provide an opportunity for students to speak Irish informally among themselves and outside the classroom setting.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish teachers participate in the subject development planning process. The school's senior management appreciate the benefit of this process. The principal and deputy principal guide the department's work by suggesting discussion topics and by providing checklists to ensure that the

appropriate documentation is drafted. The annual report which is provided by the Irish department was noted. This report is a valuable document because it gives management a clear picture of the Irish activities in the school. A suggested further development is the inclusion in the report of a section detailing the department's current area of focus and the steps to be taken to implement its objectives.

A co-ordinator is nominated on a rotating basis and the nominee's chief responsibility is to facilitate and guide collaborative planning by the department's members. The department's planning file provides good insight into the work which has been completed to date. Among the documents which have been developed by the department are a homework policy, an account of the links between Irish and other subjects, an account of how students with special education needs are catered for, a list of the available resources, an analysis of results in certificate examinations as well as an account of the various assessment methods being implemented.

Yearly schemes of work have been developed which provide an insight into the various topics which are covered during the school-year. They contain a reference to sample activities and the resources which may be used. The teachers are commended for the work which they have completed already. As schemes develop, it is recommended that reference be made to the skills being practiced while students are engaged in the specified activities. It is strongly recommended that as much balance as possible between all the language skills – hearing, speaking, reading and writing – be ensured. Teachers are also reminded of the importance of self-assessment and it would be of value to include a separate section in the schemes where successful classroom strategies are mentioned as well as challenges to be overcome.

Regarding the TY scheme, teachers are to be commended for their effort to provide students with a varied experience of learning Irish. The emphasis which is placed on the development of the students' presentation, interpersonal and organisational skills is noted. A whole-school review of the TY programme is taking place at present. In this context, it would be worthwhile if the teachers of Irish considered the benefit of drafting the TY language programme in the form of Transition Units. Such an approach is currently being promoted by the *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)* and it is believed that the focus on skills such as information processing and critical and creative thinking will greatly benefit the students. Sample units and templates can be accessed at [www.ncca.ie/ga](http://www.ncca.ie/ga). Teachers are also reminded of the many competitions being organised at national level for TY students in particular. Such competitions could comprise part of the language programme and it is believed they would ideally suit a mixed-ability class where students present with a wide range of skills.

The teachers meet on a formal basis each term. The minutes of these meetings were reviewed. Many items are discussed at these meetings including activities for *Seachtain na Gaeilge*, house examinations, textbook selection, the department's budget, resources, the content of schemes etc. The benefit arising from the teachers' practice of discussing matters informally is also recognised. It is believed that further benefit would accrue from additional discussion of classroom practice during formal meetings. A possible approach would be that one or two teachers would share information on an aspect of their practice which in their opinion would be helpful to their colleagues.

Each teacher did comprehensive planning for the classes which were observed. Every teacher produced a plan or lesson notes indicated the level of fore-thought given to the lesson steps and the aspects of the language to be acquired by the students. For the most part, teachers had decided on a variety of activities. Even better practice was observed in a small number of instances where students were given a mix of individual and interactive tasks. It is strongly recommended that

interactive tasks such as paired work, group work, or students presenting information to their fellow students generally form an integral part of Irish lessons. Teachers are also reminded that it is better still when such interactive tasks are woven into the various activities of the lesson rather than at the end of the lesson alone.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Irish was the principal language in use in all the lessons observed. The teachers used only Irish when speaking to their students and for the most part the students indicated a good understanding of what teachers said. The teachers are to be commended for the time and effort involved in the establishment of work practices in their classrooms where Irish is the main medium of communication. The emphasis on the production of complete sentences was noted. It is also laudable that the practice regarding the speaking of Irish was consistent across all classes observed. In this regard it would add value to the teachers' work if the department's policy regarding the use of the target language and English during Irish lessons were specified in their Policy on Spoken Irish. This policy would provide guidance to newly-appointed or to substitute teachers.

The teachers praised their students' work and such praise frequently encouraged additional participation. When students made an error, many teachers provided correction in a sensitive manner which was encouraging. Indeed, the opportunity was often availed of to explain the salient point at issue to all students. The integrated teaching of grammar accords with best practice because those learning a grammatical rule will understand it better if they observe and hear the rule being applied.

Questioning was used effectively to assess the students' understanding of newly-taught material and to evaluate the students' knowledge of previously-taught topics. A mixture of individual and open questions was used. Students made a commendable effort to use whatever Irish they knew when providing answers. When it is obvious that a student does not have the answer to a particular question, teachers are reminded to ensure that he does have the answer to the question before proceeding to the next question. This task can be approached in many ways. For instance, a return visit could be made to the student having acquired the correct answer from another student or, if it becomes clear that a number of students do not have the answer to the question, a minute or two could be allocated during which they could consult a colleague. Many teachers used the practice of building on answers to lower-order questions in order to put higher-order questions to the students. This practice is commended. The students' ability to cope with such questions was noted. Best practice was observed when sufficient time was given to students to reflect and to provide an answer in their own words. In such instances the teacher accepted whatever answer was offered as a starting point with a view to compiling a more comprehensive answer. This practice gives priority to the students' opinions and experience and it provides an effective stimulus to them to formulate and voice their own opinions. Assessment for Learning places special emphasis on the quality of the questioning and it is believed that it would benefit the students and the teachers of Irish if a wider range of questioning techniques was used.

Each teacher engaged the students in a range of activities during the lesson, which ensured variety in the lesson itself and stimulated the students' continuing participation. The practice was of greater benefit still where a thematic link was forged between these activities and where they created opportunities for practising the four language skills. These instances provided for effective reinforcement of the newly-acquired language. A number of teachers provided an opportunity to their students to work in pairs or in groups during the lesson. It was evident that

these students had some experience of cooperative learning and the teachers who arrange for students to communicate with each other on a regular basis are to be commended. Cooperative learning has special merit as a strategy for engaging students' differentiated strengths and needs. As the students become familiar with the rubrics of shared learning it would be hoped that every teacher would use it more widely. At national level much emphasis is being placed on student-centred education and on the implementation of cooperative-learning strategies. Irish teachers can access expert knowledge from the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. A number of Assessment for Learning strategies carry the additional benefit of promoting student-centred activity during lessons. It is therefore expected that, as teachers implement such strategies, students will adopt a more central role in the teaching and learning process.

Aside from the textbook, use was made of worksheets, audio segments, the whiteboard, flashcards and teacher notes. The teachers are to be commended for devoting time to creating these resources, especially those resources which had a visual impact on the students. Teachers are reminded of the value attaching to authentic material such as pictures, magazines, brochures and websites. As the storage space improves and with the development of ICT resources which will be available in the classrooms, it would be expected that additional variety will be introduced into the lesson activities. Creative ideas regarding the use of ICT in the classrooms as well as a wide choice of stimulating resources can be accessed on the websites [www.slss.ie/gaeilge](http://www.slss.ie/gaeilge) and [www.scoilnet.ie](http://www.scoilnet.ie).

## **ASSESSMENT**

The department's homework policy provides guidance regarding the nature of the tasks which the students undertake for homework. Guidance is also provided regarding the amount of time that students should devote to homework. In addition reference is made to learning as a central task and this is commendable because an integral part of the process of acquiring language involves the revision of new elements of language which are acquired from day-to-day.

Samples of the students' written work and lesson notes were examined. It is very good practice that students keep their own records of classroom work because it fosters independent learning. In addition, the notes copybook is a useful reference point for students when preparing for examinations. There was variety in the written assignments completed by the students and it was evident that they had been monitored. As teachers become more accustomed to Assessment for Learning it is hoped that a wider range of strategies would be used in order to give helpful feedback to students on how to improve the standard of their work. Similarly, teachers are reminded of the benefit of requiring students – rather than the teacher – to search for and provide the correct version of sentences that contain mistakes in students' written tasks.

An assessment system is in place which ensures that students' progress is evaluated on a regular basis. Individual teachers decide on setting mid-term examinations for their students and house examinations are administered at Christmas and summer. Students taking certificate examinations undertake mock examinations in the spring. It is a source of satisfaction that the oral skills of senior-cycle students are assessed as part of the examination system and the teachers of Irish deserve special commendation for devoting additional time to these oral tests. In order to ensure that the oral ability of every student is tested, it is suggested that possibilities regarding the implementation of ongoing assessment for junior-cycle students be considered. A credit could be awarded for their effort in speaking Irish in class and this credit could be taken into account in the results of the house examinations.

Every effort is being made to ensure that all partners are kept up to date on students' progress. Reports arising from the main examinations are sent home and parent/teacher meetings are convened for each year-group once a year. Much emphasis is placed on the cultivation of open communicative channels between teachers and parents and it is understood that a parent may meet with any teacher if required.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teachers are supported in the development of their professional skills.
- The programme of co-and ex-curricular activities which supports the promotion of Irish in the school community is commended.
- Subject-development planning forms an integral part of the teachers' work.
- Every teacher made significant preparation for the classes observed.
- Irish was the main language used in all the classes observed.
- Students' ability in Irish was in accordance with their own competence in the subject.
- Students engaged in a range of activities.
- Grammar was frequently taught in an integrated manner.
- An appropriate emphasis was placed on independent learning.
- An assessment system is in place which updates the partners on students' progress.

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 manner in which students are allocated to Irish classes be kept under review.
- It is recommended that a more central role be given to the student in the teaching and learning process and that the use Assessment for Learning strategies for this purpose be explored.
- It is recommended that the oral competence of junior-cycle students be evaluated.

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