Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Chiaráin
Croom, County Limerick
Roll number: 71840V

Date of inspection: 09 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Chiaráin. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching 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 learning and teaching. 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 deputy principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

There are seven teachers of Irish in Coláiste Chiaráin, the majority of whom have Irish as their principal teaching subject. The teachers are dynamic and very committed to ensuring that their students are offered worthwhile experiences of learning Irish. During the inspection visit their interest in new educational developments was noted and it was most heartening to observe their open, positive attitude towards the inspection activities.

Students in fifth and sixth years have six class periods per week for Irish which is quite a satisfactory provision. All other students are timetabled for four class periods weekly. It is recommended that daily contact with the target language be provided for junior cycle students.

First-year and transition-year classes are of mixed ability. In other year groups there is a mixture of streaming and banding arrangements whereby within each band students of Irish are streamed according to their ability. It would be worthwhile to consider the benefits of also having mixed-ability classes in second year as well as having mixed-ability groups within higher level and ordinary-level bands in the other year groups.

A total of eighty-eight students have an exemption from studying Irish. This figure equates to twelve percent (12%) of the total student population. Of these, thirty-six have learning difficulties and the remainder have received their early education outside the state. Efforts are made to provide learning support or extra English classes concurrently with timetabled Irish classes. However, for the most part, students with an exemption remain in Irish classes where they continue their individual study. It was reported that some of these students wish to participate in the Irish class activities. This is an encouraging development and it would be a positive step if all of these students gained some experience of Irish during their time in school. Senior management is reminded of the importance of recording details of students who have an exemption from Irish and of updating these records from year to year. It is recommended that this information be detailed in the subject plan for Irish.
The school community is eagerly awaiting the construction of a new school building. It is intended that dedicated rooms for Irish will be provided and teachers look forward to the time when they will have facilities to create a stimulating learning environment in their rooms. In the meantime, it is recommended that as much as possible of student work be displayed in the classrooms, and if feasible, to display charts showing common speech idioms and points of language accuracy on the walls. It would also be worthwhile to begin collecting and cataloguing reading materials for teenagers.

School management is aware of the significant role information and communications technology (ICT) has in present day life and especially in the life of teenagers. Therefore, it is school policy to make every effort to link ICT to as many aspects of school life as possible. It is very worthwhile for the school to have such a policy as the closer the learning experiences are to the everyday life of the students the easier it is to motivate them to participate.

All teachers understand the importance of developing their professional skills. School management supports them in this regard through inviting guest speakers into the school to discuss different educational topics. The whole school staff has received an input on cooperative learning and the inspector was given to understand that team teaching will soon be proposed for consideration by staff. These are very welcome developments especially as they will create even greater discussion of teaching practice among teachers. The majority of the teachers of Irish have attended in-service workshops for Irish presented by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). Particular commendation is due to teachers who have completed, or are undertaking, additional courses in order to upskill in specific aspects of teaching Irish. In some cases, it was evident in classroom observation that certain teachers were not fluent in Irish. To begin with, these teachers should pay more attention to the accuracy of the Irish they use in class. They are advised to consult with their colleagues regarding the correct use of the metalanguage of the classroom. In addition, they should exploit every opportunity to speak Irish among themselves, with other members of the school community and with other Irish speakers.

A lot has been done to promote Irish outside the classroom. Included in these activities are trips to the Gaeltacht areas, an Irish Club and a school magazine. Every student is encouraged to obtain the Irish fàinne. It was reported that Seachtain na Gaeilge is an important time in the school calendar when a wide range of activities are organised to encourage the school community to speak Irish. Teachers are highly commended for all these efforts. In support of this work, school management is requested to avail of every opportunity to use a little Irish at school events, in school correspondence and publications.

**Planning and Preparation**

Subject development planning is an integral part of the work of teachers. It is evident that the teachers of Irish function as a closely knit team and that there is frequent discussion among them, either on a formal or informal basis, on issues concerning the teaching of Irish in the school.

Formal department meetings are held once a term. The coordinator convenes and manages the meetings. The coordinator is selected on a rotational basis, an arrangement which is commended. Minutes of meetings show that discussion on classroom practice takes place at these meetings. This is an example of best practice and teachers are commended on the openness with which they approach these meetings. A greater degree of formality in these practices is recommended and it is suggested that every teacher brings to the meeting one example of an effective learning strategy as well as an example of a challenge which they have yet to overcome. This is an effective method of sharing the expertise the different members of the team have of the diverse aspects of learning and teaching Irish.
Schemes of work have been set out for every year group. The work for the year is based on the syllabus topics and the schemes place considerable emphasis on the different tasks which students must complete and on the skills which will be developed as a result. This approach is commended. When schemes of work are being developed in the future, it is recommended that the language functions associated with the different topics be set out. Arising from this work, one would assume also that the language structures and points of accuracy involved in these topics would be specified.

Teachers had made extensive preparation for the lessons observed in so far as the stages of the lessons had been set out clearly in advance. There was a thematic link between all the activities and this approach is commended. Every teacher had planned for a variety of tasks to provide students with experience in the four language skills, a practice which is to be commended. In certain cases, students were largely engaged in listening to the teacher speaking Irish. Teachers are asked to lessen their reliance on this approach and in its place provide short periods of intercommunication throughout the lesson period.

Every teacher had reflected on the language involved in the lesson content and, in many cases, had prepared the appropriate vocabulary on a Powerpoint presentation. In other instances, diagrams - instead of words - were used to encourage students to speak and it was evident that this proved to be a most useful methodology. This work was effectively developed by having students practise the language structures which resulted from their own oral efforts. These teachers demonstrated a very good understanding of the specific aspects of the language involved in the oral content of the lesson and the most successful learning outcomes were evident in these instances. As a general guide, teachers are advised to identify in advance of each lesson a minimum of three relevant language structures. When learning activities are being devised for lessons, as many opportunities as possible for correct manipulation of the same structures should be made available through the use of a mixture of the direct method and other interactive methods.

**LEARNING AND TEACHING**

In general, Irish was the principal language of communication in the lessons observed in so far as teachers addressed students in Irish. Many teachers created opportunities for their students to speak Irish through oral questioning. In addition, a number of teachers set pair work for students which resulted in students speaking to each other in Irish. In two lessons, the confidence students had in speaking Irish to each other was noted and showed that Irish was the normal means of communication in these classes. Special commendation is due to teachers who have spent time and effort establishing and fostering this practice. It is recommended that every teacher makes even more extensive use of strategies which create opportunities for students to speak Irish.

All in all, a positive collaborative atmosphere was evident in classes. Many teachers praised students for their work and encouraged them to participate in the lesson activities. The best and most beneficial interactions were evident in classes where teachers spent a good deal of time among students – talking to them, listening to them or looking at their work.

Students were set a variety of tasks which offered practice of a range of language skills. The diversity of the activities stimulated continuous participation on the part of students. Furthermore, it provided students with an opportunity to practise and revise newly acquired language. All teachers are reminded of the importance of providing students with opportunities to practise the four language skills, in equal measure, during the lesson. Teachers are also requested to ensure that they set tasks for students which require them to speak Irish and to recall and use prior learning. To this end students should be asked to express opinions, compose stories, pose questions and answer higher order questions.
Among the resources used were laptops, data projectors, work sheets, textbooks, whiteboards and flash cards. It was evident that teachers have spent time designing aids and it is very helpful for them to have some of these stored electronically. These are tools which are very useful to teachers to facilitate the learning process. However, every teacher should understand that it is the teacher herself who is the primary source of language and knowledge for students. Therefore, when teachers are designing resources it is of vital importance that every teacher asks herself the question - ‘What aspects of language use will this picture/paragraph/sheet/listening or music clip inspire?’

Independent learning was promoted in certain classes in as much as students were taking down their own notes according as the lesson progressed. This is excellent practice, especially since it provides students with their own record of the learning they have achieved. More widespread use of this good practice is recommended.

**ASSESSMENT**

There is a balance between the four language skills within the assessment system. This practice is commendable. It is intended that every student will undertake the optional oral examination in the Junior Certificate from the year 2011 onwards. This is commended.

Student progress is assessed by a variety of methods which include oral questioning in class, monitoring of class work, correction of homework, class tests, continuous assessment, house examinations and pre-examinations. More extensive use could be made of peer assessment and self-assessment as a means of promoting independent learning and it is recommended that teachers discuss the benefit of such strategies. Each teacher maintains a record of student attendance and examination results in their diaries. Results of main examinations are recorded on the school’s e-portal system.

Examples of student work were examined. Students had written a good deal of the work in their copybooks while some more was in electronic form on their personal web pages. On the whole, there was good variety in the tasks completed. Technology was being use effectively by having students practice their oral and listening skills. It was evident that a number of teachers were continuously monitoring student work and, consequently, these particular teachers had a good understanding of the proficiencies, standards attained and needs of their students. It is recommended that this good practice be extended and that teachers ensure that all students receive worthwhile feedback on how to improve the standard of their work.

There are five periods of assessment specified on the school calendar and reports are sent home after each assessment. Students are awarded a grade for Irish as well as marks for effort, behaviour and homework. In the case of the grade awarded, this is generally for results gained in class tests or house examinations. On other occasions it consists of an average mark awarded for a combination of tests. The regularity of these reports ensures that all participants are informed on a continuous basis of the progress being made.

School management carries out an analysis of student results achieved in the certificate examinations and this information is shared with the teachers of Irish. School authorities recognise that the context is not the same in any two schools and therefore, not alone are comparisons made with the national norms but student achievement in Irish is compared with achievement in the other subject areas in the school. This is a good approach. In the future, when this practice is undergoing further development, it is recommended that feedback be sought from teachers on the positive aspects as well as any development material which comes to light.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school makes use of as many opportunities as possible to link ICT with activities in Irish classes.
- Teachers of Irish are diligent workers and are very committed to promoting Irish among young people.
- Every effort is made to promote the use of Irish outside the classroom.
- Teachers are fully involved in the subject development planning process.
- Within the Irish department teachers discuss their classroom practice.
- Extensive preparation was made by teachers for the lessons observed.
- On the whole, Irish was the principal language of communication in the lessons observed.
- Students were set to communicate with each other.
- A positive cooperative atmosphere was evident in the classes.
- Students were set a range of different activities.
- Effective use was made of resources.
- The assessment system provides balance between the four language skills.
- All participants are informed of student progress on a regular basis.

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

- It is recommended that, as part of the subject development planning process, teachers would focus on the correct use of Irish during lessons.
- It is recommended that the principal language structures to be acquired by students during the lesson be identified in advance.
- It is recommended that even further use be made of strategies which promote communication among students.

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

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Coláiste Chiaráin enthusiastically supports the Subject Inspection process, as conducted by the Department of Education & Skills, as a key element of our commitment to excellence and ongoing improvement and evaluation. We are constantly striving to improve and enhance the quality of our education provision and we regard this process as being very helpful in meeting this goal.

The report on the quality of teaching and learning of Irish in Coláiste Chiaráin is broadly reflective of how seriously we approach this particular subject and furthermore illuminates our approach to the teaching of languages across the curriculum.

While acknowledging the limitations of a one day inspection process, we consider the report to be detailed and comprehensive and a fair representation of the quality of teaching and learning in Coláiste Chiaráin. We are particularly pleased with the very positive affirmations contained therein, and is, both individually and collectively, a genuine endorsement of the work done by both the teaching staff and the management of the school.