An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Abbey Community College
Boyle,
County Roscommon
Roll number: 76072E

Date of inspection: 5 November 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in the Abbey Community College, Boyle, County Roscommon. 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 and deputy 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

Good provision is being made in the timetable for the teaching and learning of Irish. On a weekly basis there are four single periods in the junior cycle and five single periods in the senior cycle. In addition, an extra period is being provided for those students who are taking higher-level Irish in the senior cycle. The number of class-groups within the various year groups is satisfactory in terms of the average number of students in each group. There are mixed-ability classes in first year and all other students are organised in accordance with the state examination levels. The classes take place concurrently to facilitate movement between the various levels as is appropriate. Students are given every encouragement to take the higher level course as far as possible during the cycles. The school manages carefully those students who wish to transfer to a more appropriate level, on the basis of the permission which must be provided by the parent or guardian, together with advice from the subject teacher, the guidance counsellor and school management. This approach is highly commended.

All of the teachers who are involved in the teaching and learning of Irish in the school have qualifications in Irish. The Irish teaching team are members of the Irish Teachers Association and the school management pays the subscription fee. School management facilitates the teachers to attend both inservice courses provided by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and lectures on Irish. It is recommended, that at department level, discussion takes place on the information provided at such courses and from other sources in order to examine the experience which arises from the use of the recommended methodologies in the classroom. In this way the department will develop teaching and learning methods which will be suited to the school’s own particular context. The vast majority of teachers have the opportunity to teach in both cycles and at the various examination levels. However, at the time of the inspection, the higher level course in the senior cycle was being taught by just one teacher. It is advisable that these classes should not be in the care of just one teacher and that other teachers have the opportunity to become familiar with the higher level leaving certificate course.
All of the Irish language teachers have their own base classrooms. Each classroom is equipped with information and communication technology materials including a computer and broadband connection, and many classrooms also have data projectors. There is easy access to televisions, CDs DVDs, overhead and data projectors. There are also three computer rooms available on a booking basis. Training on the use of ICT was provided to all members of staff. It is now recommended that the Irish department considers its own strengths and challenges regarding the use of ICT in the classroom. An incremental plan should be devised to meet these requirements so that the students can experience the use of ICT in Irish, an experience which is closely connected with their experience of the world. The school has a library and the Irish department intends to add to its collection of Irish books during the current year. It is recommended that the SLSS website and also the website www.cogg.ie be used as reference points when the library is being developed. A list can be compiled and a collection of resources for Irish can be made systematically to support language teaching and learning.

Among the school’s population seven point eight per cent have an exemption from Irish. Twenty nine percent of the students present with recognised learning difficulties and the remaining seventy one percent received their education outside the jurisdiction. Every encouragement is given to exempted students to participate in Irish activities. During the current year two students, though exempted, are studying Irish. This approach and the all-embracing school philosophy concerning the students’ language awareness are commendable.

The teachers are congratulated on their diligence in promoting Irish culture both within and outside the school through the provision of a range of extra and co-curricular activities for the students. Seachtain na Gaeilge is an important occasion on the school’s calendar. Gaeltacht scholarships are awarded to a number of students each year under the auspices of Roscommon Vocational Education Committee. Some year groups attend Irish dramas. Students participate in TG4 film competitions during Transition Year (TY).

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school has engaged with the school development planning process on a formal basis since the year 2005. The teachers meet three times during the school year. Records of the meetings are maintained. The plan for Irish, however, contains minutes of only two meetings. It is recommended that all minutes are retained in the plan for Irish as a record of the department’s work. The teachers meet informally on a regular basis in order to support the formal dialogue. A subject coordinator has been appointed by the department and the appointment is rotated every year. It is recommended that the rotating practice be reviewed to retain the nominated coordinator for a two-year period. This arrangement would ensure continuity in terms of planning aims and would gradually ensure that all staff members would cultivate the leadership skills required for the role of coordinator. The department and school management are congratulated for prioritising language planning.

A plan for Irish was compiled for the year 2005/06 providing details of the practices and procedures in use for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. The headings include the department aims, provision for the subject in the timetable, classroom organisation, allocation of students to classes, list of teachers and textbooks. It is recommended that this section of the plan be reviewed in order to ensure the organisational details are appropriate to the current circumstances in the school. The department has developed aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. It is recommended that the department extends its aims and objectives in accordance with the Irish syllabuses. It is also recommended that the department
presents its aims in terms of student-learning outcomes across the four major language skills. It would be very worthwhile to do the work in Irish this time.

Long-term plans for curriculum delivery for each year-group were made available to the inspector. These plans indicated many differences in terms of the amount of information they contained as well as the various templates being used by the different teachers. In the best plans, details were provided on the teaching topics, the methodologies, the resources and the assessment methods. It is recommended that these long-term plans be developed into schemes of work and that learning targets and time periods be detailed in them. In this way, the planning will be carried out to teach the language thematically and in an integrated manner across the various elements of the syllabus and in accordance with the approach which is recommended in the Irish syllabuses. Samples of this integrated planning can be found in the Support Guidelines for Teaching the Revised Course of Literature from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which are in the school’s planning documentation. This approach is recommended to all staff members. When the department is engaging in co-operative planning, it is also recommended that the same programme of work be agreed for the first term in second and fifth year for those students who transfer from higher to ordinary level.

It is recommended that an action plan be devised to ensure the strategic development of the department. The recommendations in this report and the department’s priorities should be central to this plan. A time schedule should be agreed for the action plan and the staff members identified to achieve the targets. It is recommended that the department’s work be reviewed on a regular basis and that records of review outcomes are retained in the plan.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good preparation, in the form of worksheets, transparencies, pictures, PowerPoint slides and taped material, was made for all of the lessons observed during the course of the inspection. There was a good standard of short-term planning in a number of classes, which ensured these lessons had a structured sequence, good pace and clear learning targets. When short-term planning is being carried out, it is recommended that a number of learning objectives are selected appropriate to the different abilities of the students and to the length of the class period. It is worthwhile to share the learning targets with the students as was the practice in the majority of the lessons. It is also important to be mindful that the lesson content develops in a progressive way from one step to the next. Limited use was being made of the integrated method in the course of the inspection, and it was clear from the random sample of copybooks examined that the courses were not being taught in an integrated thematic manner. It is recommended that this matter be reviewed in the context of short-term planning and that as many of the four main language skills as is practicable are integrated into each lesson. Such an approach has better outcomes in terms of language acquisition due to the mutually interdependent reinforcing relationship that exists between the skills in language learning. The recommendations in the NCCA publication, mentioned above, will be a valuable reference point for this work.

The vast majority of teachers used good teaching and learning techniques. Among the best methodologies observed was exemplary use of group work. Groups had clear roles and were working on separate paragraphs of a letter. A suitable time for the tasks was arranged beforehand. The teacher attended well to the different needs of the groups. This differentiated approach is very commendable. A very good feedback session ensued during which the paragraphs of the letter from the groups were recorded on the whiteboard. An open invitation was given to the groups to contribute additional sentences to the letter, providing for and motivating students who
had the ability to respond. In another class there was good balance between the student activities and the teacher’s input. At the commencement of the lesson, students were working on a sentence matching activity which had been pre-prepared by the teacher. This task summarised the learning which had taken place the previous day, a practice which is commendable. This matching task was corrected on a PowerPoint slide. A questioning session followed between the teacher and the students based on images on the screen, and the students participated eagerly in the discussion. There were also other lessons where effective questioning sessions comprised the central teaching and learning methodology. Although this technique contributed to the students’ participation in the lesson, it is recommended that a more widespread use be made of learning methods which provide opportunity to the students to be actively involved in their own learning. Good use was made of the integrated approach on the theme of school. This practice is commended, however it is recommended that the aural task contain more specific objectives. In a senior class where the layout of a letter comprised the material for the lesson, the seven steps to letter composition were introduced to the students without conducting a brainstorming session on the students’ prior knowledge of letter layout. It is recommended when commencing a new aspect of the syllabus, that a brainstorming session be conducted in order to connect new learning to what has been learned already.

All the teachers made good use of the board, transparencies and PowerPoint to provide visual support to teaching and learning. Among the best traits in the recording were: very good vocabulary grouping and, in a poetry lesson, the contrast between island and urban life was recorded in a structured manner. It is recommended that more widespread use is made of this structured recording to provide a record of the main points of lessons, as well as an example to the students when they are doing composition work. It is also recommended that excessive time for note taking is not provided to students during lessons.

All teachers had good classroom organisation skills, and in general there was a positive cooperative spirit in the lessons observed during the inspection.

Irish was the language of communication in all the lessons observed. It was evident that the vast majority of students had a good understanding of the subject matter of lessons and they participated willingly in the target language when given the opportunity to do so. The students’ attention was directed towards grammatical points in the context of the text in preference to teaching grammar as atomistic items. Good simplification of vocabulary was carried out, which included the use of gestures, which avoided the unnecessary use of the translation method. In some classes the teacher demonstrated the relationship between words introduced during the lesson and words which the students were familiar with already. The teachers are congratulated for their approaches to teaching the target language. It is recommended that consideration be given to the kind of vocabulary which the different year groups require when asking questions, making requests and indicating difficulties in the target language during the Irish lessons. A motivating learning environment was in evidence in many of the classrooms. In order to develop this good work it is recommended that the core vocabulary required by students in the course of the lessons be available on classroom wall charts, and that they be changed regularly. Gradually, useful vocabulary will be acquired by each year group from year to year.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school has developed a brief description of the whole-school approaches to assessment and homework. It is recommended that whole-school assessment policies be developed, and that the homework policy comprise a section of it. It would be beneficial when conducting this project, to
refer to assessment for learning techniques on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. All of the partners have a role in assessment and homework matters, and it is recommended that students and parents in particular, have a central role in the development of an assessment policy.

Certificate students take summative examinations after the mid-term break in October and mock examinations in the Spring. Other students in the school also undergo summative assessments twice yearly. A report based on these summative exams is sent home. There was a random sample of these tests in the planning documentation and different tests were being used by the various teachers. It is recommended that the department discusses the benefits to the students which accrue from common examinations. It is also recommended that the different language skills be taken into account in these summative assessment, and that parents or guardians be made aware of the students’ achievement across all language skills.

A range of formative assessment methods is being used in the classes to monitor the learning process and students’ progress. In this regard the students’ written homework is corrected on a daily basis, tests are given when topics have been completed, and also at the end of term. Effective formative strategies were in use during the inspection, including oral questioning at different levels, pair work and individual work, and teachers attended well to the needs of students when completing tasks.

All the school’s students use a homework diary as appropriate. The school is congratulated on the amount of Irish being entered in the diaries. The year-head teacher manages the homework diaries and a parent signs the diary every week. Parents and teachers also use the diaries as a means of communication. These approaches are commendable. The random sample of diaries examined indicated that homework was being assigned regularly, however there was much emphasis on writing, rote learning and revision. It was reported that aural tasks were assigned sometimes. It is recommended that tasks set include variety across all language skills. Such an approach re-affirms students’ achievement in all the skills instead of prioritising one skill. In some diaries and copybooks, vocabulary learning or language idioms were given as homework with limited connection between the words other than they referred to the same theme. It is recommended, that vocabulary-learning strategies be taught explicitly as a scaffold for such a task, especially to the students for whom language learning poses difficulties.

It was evident, from the copybooks examined on a random basis, that a good range of work had been done in accordance with the requirements of the syllabuses. It was clear, however, that the courses were not being taught in an integrated thematic manner. Corrections, which focussed on grammatical errors or spelling were evident in the students’ work. The vast majority of corrections gave clear guidelines on the correct form of the word, or the correct spelling was provided. In other copybooks a mere monitoring of student work was taking place. It is recommended, that the department discuss the learning value of corrections, including formative corrections. There were also copybooks containing long pieces of text in English, and it is recommended that the over-use of the translation method be reviewed.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school support for the teaching and learning of Irish is good in terms of the timetable provision and the facilities available to teachers.
• The short-term planning and preparation observed in the majority of lessons was of a good standard.
• Good teaching and learning methods were being used by the majority of teachers.
• Good systems have been developed for both summative and formative assessment.

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 department analyses its strengths and weaknesses regarding the use of ICT in the classroom, and discusses the information emanating from the SLSS courses concerning how methodologies and resources for Irish can be compiled systematically.
• It is recommended that the section of the subject plan referring to the department’s organisation details be reviewed. It is also recommended that additional shared planning takes place to develop agreed templates for teaching the language in an integrated way under the headings recommended above.
• It is recommended that all language skills be taken into consideration in the students’ summative and formative assessment. Approaches should also be developed, as a department, for the provision of developmental corrections of the students’ work.

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

Published, September 2010