An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Wesley College
Ballinteer, Dublin 16
Roll number: 61010U

Date of inspection: 16 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 Wesley College, Ballinteer. 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Wesley College, students are placed in mixed ability classes for Irish in first year. In second year students are set into ordinary and higher-level classes. Students are free to move between ordinary and higher levels if they wish and following consultation with the subject co-ordinator. The parents are always contacted if a student is moving from one level to another. This is good practice. There are four higher-level and two ordinary-level classes in second year. In third year the number of higher-level classes drops to three and that arrangement of classes continues through Transition Year (TY) and into fifth year. There are two higher-level and four ordinary-level classes in sixth year. It is recommended that the school management and the Irish teachers investigate and discuss various strategies aimed at the possibility of retaining the third higher-level class from fifth year into sixth year.

First and third-year students have five class-periods per week for Irish. Second-year and Transition Year students have four per week. Fifth and sixth-year students have five class-periods per week. This provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory.

There are seven teachers of Irish in the school, all of whom are graduates in Irish, with many years of experience in teaching the language. Classes are exchanged among the teachers from year to year, under the guidance of the school management, so that every teacher is afforded opportunities of teaching the different age-groups and levels. This is good practice.

Of the total school enrolment of eight hundred and eighty eight students, one hundred and six have exemptions from the study of Irish. Students with learning difficulties account for fifty six of the exemptions, students who lived abroad up until the age of 11 or older account for thirty five exemptions and students who have come abroad account for fifteen exemptions. Students who have exemptions can, however, study Irish and there are two students taking up this option in the school at present. Admirable efforts are made to encourage every student in the school to take part in Irish cultural events being run in the school, as part of Seachtain na Gaeilge, for example.
It was reported that a great effort is made in the school to give Irish a high profile. However, it was noted that Irish is not very visible in the school environment. This is an area that school management could look at with a view to further developing the profile of Irish. It is always ensured that some part of school events is run through the medium of Irish. Seachtain na Gaeilge is always celebrated in the school with a series of enjoyable Irish events and occasions. The school has an Irish club for fifth and sixth-year students; members meet once a week to take advantage of the opportunity of speaking Irish in an informal setting. Students take part in table quizzes through the medium of Irish and special guests are invited occasionally to the school to speak to the students about aspects of Irish literature. Another event organised annually for senior students is a weekend visit to the Gaeltacht. The efforts made by the teachers and the management to let students experience Irish, as a living language, are commended. A cross-curricular and extra-curricular programme for Irish reinforces the work done by teachers in the Irish classes and thus plays an important part in students’ learning. It is recommended that teachers review this programme periodically to ensure that the diversity of the programme is continually developed and refreshed. On the day of the evaluation, a number of recommendations were made regarding ways of enhancing the variety of the programme and the teachers could consider implementing these suggestions. The views of Transition Year students might be requested in identifying new events that would appeal to teenagers, and also in organising those events.

Most of the teachers of Irish have their own classrooms. The classrooms observed were decorated in a pleasant and stimulating way, with a range of materials relevant to the teaching and learning of Irish on display on the walls, as well as exhibitions of students’ work. This is commended as good practice.

It was reported that a wide range of materials and resources is available to the teachers of Irish and that these are kept in the co-ordinator’s room. Excellent technological resources are also available to the teachers of Irish in all the classrooms. It was not clear on the day of the evaluation whether a listing was available of all the resources in the school for the teaching and learning of Irish. It is recommended that such a list be compiled, if not already available, and that this list be part of the overall plan for Irish in the school. It was reported during the evaluation that three of the Irish-teaching staff attended a course run by the Second Level Support Service for Irish on the use of ICT in the Irish-language classroom and the teachers’ commitment in this regard is commended. It was evident from the use of ICT in certain Irish classes that the expertise acquired on the course was being effectively used to enhance students’ learning in the classes.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The teachers of Irish convene formally as a group once a term. They meet informally once a fortnight also to discuss matters relating to the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. There is a co-ordinator for Irish in the school who is responsible for planning for the teaching and learning of the language. The co-ordinator’s responsibilities are precisely defined in the school documentation and they include responsibility for organising meetings, house exams, allocation of students to appropriate classes, textbooks, co-ordinating in-service courses for teachers, co-ordinating school events related to Irish, designing the Transition Year course, the department budget, feedback to senior management in the school and to the board of management, as well as analysing and monitoring exam results.

A summary of the curriculum for every yeargroup in the junior cycle and in the senior cycle is provided for parents and for the school community. The summaries for junior cycle give an idea of what will be dealt with in the various subjects areas during the year, the textbooks that will be
used and the assessment methods. The summary for Leaving Certificate gives an account of the Irish examinations, referring to the three levels, and indicating the different exam layouts and marking schemes. The provision of these summaries is highly commended because they give parents a clear insight into the general curriculum being followed by their children and into the Leaving Certificate examination system.

An outline plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year was made available on the day of the evaluation. The work completed to date on compiling this plan is commended. Particularly praiseworthy was the emphasis placed on Irish in contemporary life and it would be worth developing this part of the course even further. It is recommended, however, that the plan in general be further refined and that more detail be provided re methodologies, the range of resources to be used and the development of communication strategies. It is also recommended that the plan refer to the use of ICT in Irish lessons.

Careful, comprehensive planning had been done for all the Irish classes observed. Worksheets and notes had been prepared and these were distributed among the students in the majority of classes observed. In certain cases, impressive preparatory work had been done in preparing technological resources for the class, which greatly supported the student’s learning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In the vast majority of the classes observed, the use of Irish as a language of management, communication and teaching was excellent. The majority of teachers endeavoured to avoid the use of translation from Irish to English by using a range of strategies and activities; this approach is highly commended. In one case observed, however, direct translation from Irish to English was used to ensure that the students understood the subject-matter of the lesson. It is recommended that a policy be agreed regarding the use of the target language and various approaches to avoid the use of translation when there is no need for it. That policy should be clearly stated in the plan for teaching and learning Irish in the school.

In some of the lessons observed, the objective of the lesson was communicated clearly to the students, an effective method of focusing the students’ attention on the class-work and on the learning targets to be achieved. It is recommended that, in all classes, the objective of the lesson and the learning targets to be achieved be displayed on the white board or on the screen.

Great efforts were made in most of the classes to create opportunities for communication for the students through the use of questioning – both open and closed questions, through using pair-work and group-work and through the use of games. This approach is highly commended, such is the importance of affording the students regular opportunities for speaking Irish during the lessons. It is recommended that such opportunities be provided during all Irish lessons and that teachers ensure that students get regular experience of the use of Irish in both formal and informal situations. In a few cases observed, students were reminded to speak Irish during the lesson and they were more than willing to comply. In other cases, the students made great efforts, according to their ability, to communicate in Irish with the teachers; those efforts were really praiseworthy. In a few cases observed, however, it was more difficult to encourage the students to play an active part in the lesson. It is recommended that teachers discuss some interactive strategies that could be used in such cases to encourage and motivate the students to participate actively. It was evident in a few cases observed that recommendations made at the in-service courses organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish were being implemented in the classes, a praiseworthy approach. It is recommended that the teachers consider whether some of the
suggestions for creating opportunities for communication and for encouraging the students to engage with the work, might be more widely used.

A range of materials and resources was used in some classes, to support the teaching and learning of Irish and to help in placing the subject-matter of the lesson in context for the students. Use was made, for example, of ICT, of film clips, music, slides and PowerPoint presentations. The use of these resources is highly commended because very effective use can be made of references to contemporary life to make the subject-matter of lessons more interesting for the students and to contextualise the material, especially in relation to the literature courses. The use of resources could be extended to some of the other classes, where no extra materials were used besides notes and worksheets. It is important, however, to make a definite link between the subject-matter of the lesson and the use of resources from contemporary life, so that students will understand the relevance of those resources to the work in hand.

It was evident that there was a very good relationship between the students and teachers and that they enjoyed mutual respect. Teachers walked around the classrooms talking to students, encouraging them to engage with the work, correcting their efforts and ensuring that the work was being done. Teachers continuously praised students who were making honest efforts in class. Discipline was excellent and, on the whole, the students worked diligently in their classes. Humour was used to advantage in some classes observed and it certainly enhanced the students’ enjoyment of their learning.

In general, appropriate attention was paid to the teaching of grammar. In certain cases, higher-level classes for example, teachers dealt with various aspects of Irish grammar most effectively and impressive work was done on enriching students’ Irish and developing their grammatical accuracy. The students’ pronunciation was also corrected in certain cases and it is recommended that this practice be extended to all classes, while taking care not to diminish the self-confidence or upset the speech-rhythms of the students. Appropriate dictionaries could be used in the Irish classes on a regular basis, while also acquainting the students with on-line dictionaries. Since there are excellent technological resources available in all the Irish-language classrooms, students could use www.focal.ie and other on-line resources during the lessons and during after school study.

ASSESSMENT

House exams are organised in the school before the Christmas and summer breaks. In addition, class tests are set at the two mid-term breaks and at Easter. Common test-papers are used as far as possible for the various year-groups, an approach which is commended. Parents are kept informed of the progress of their children, through regular school reports, through parent-teacher meetings and through the use of the school diary. There is a particular focus on assessment for learning (AfL) in the school for the past three years, which is praiseworthy.

It was evident from the copybooks inspected during the evaluation that homework is set regularly for the students and duly corrected. Significant work was observed in all the copybooks inspected and the exercises were thoroughly corrected, with reference to the merits of the work as well as the awarding of a mark or grade in certain cases in line with the schools’ policy of AfL. It was clear that quite an amount of time and trouble is invested in the correction of copybooks and the teachers are commended for this. The way in which reference was made in certain classes to common errors detected in the copybooks and in essays is also commended. This is a good approach which might fruitfully be adopted in all classes. It was also noted in the classes that
there was satisfactory continuity between the work done in class and the homework assigned afterwards.

A comprehensive analysis of exam results – house exams, ‘mocks’ and certificate exams – is undertaken in the school. The principal and vice-principals do a continuous analysis of exam results, of trends in the numbers of students taking exam-papers at the various levels and of comparisons between the results achieved in the school and the national norms. The results of this analysis are shared with the subject co-ordinators and with the subject teachers. This approach is highly commended because of how important it is that all interested parties should be aware of the progress being made by the students in the school. The number of students taking higher-level papers in Irish is consistent. As already mentioned earlier in this report, it would be worthwhile to try to retain the number of students taking higher level Irish in fifth year, right through to the Leaving Certificate.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The genuine efforts made by the teachers of Irish and by the school management to provide a pleasant extra-curricular and co-curricular programme in Irish, to support the students’ learning, are commended.
- Careful, comprehensive planning had been done for all the Irish classes observed.
- In general, the use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication in the classes observed, was excellent.
- In many of the classes, very good efforts were made to create effective opportunities for communication in the target language.
- In certain classes, good practice in the teaching of grammar was observed.
- In certain classes a wide range of materials and resources was used to teach the language, which greatly enhanced the students’ interest in the subject and supported their learning.

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

- It is recommended that opportunities for communication be created regularly in all Irish classes.
- It is recommended that the use of a range of resources and aids to the teaching and learning of the language be extended to all Irish classes.
- It is recommended that the possibilities be investigated of encouraging more students to take higher-level Irish for the Leaving Certificate examinations.

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

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