An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Notre Dame School
Churchtown, Dublin 14
Roll number: 60160L

Date of inspection: 20 October 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Notre Dame School, Dublin 14. 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 one day 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 to the subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Students are allocated to mixed-ability classes in first year in Notre Dame School. They are then divided into a higher-level and an ordinary-level class at the start of second year, based on the results achieved in the exams at the end of first year. The school has a very large higher-level group and a very small ordinary-level group in second year this year, a praiseworthy distribution which accords with the intentions of the teachers of Irish to encourage a large number of students to take the subject at higher level up to the Junior Certificate examination. There are two mixed-ability Irish classes again in Transition Year (TY), an arrangement which accords with Transition-Year philosophy. There is a higher-level class and an ordinary-level class in fifth year and again in sixth year. The number of students taking higher-level Irish in sixth year is smaller than it has been in recent years, but the management and the current Irish-teaching staff intend addressing this issue as the students in junior cycle move through the school.

Weekly provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory except in the case of Transition Year, that is four class-periods for first year, five periods for second and third years and five periods for fifth and sixth years. Just three periods per week are available for TY. It is recommended that the school management consider, if possible, the implications of providing an extra class-period per week for Irish for this year-group, to facilitate the teachers of Irish in providing a continuous, stimulating, interesting TY programme.

There are two fully qualified teachers of Irish in the school at present. Both are newly appointed to this school, but they have years of experience in teaching the language. The various classes are divided between the two teachers and both will have the opportunity of teaching all levels and age-groups. This is good practice.

Of the total enrolment of two hundred and thirty three students in the school, 33 are exempted from the study of Irish. It is mentioned in the plan for Irish that students who have an exemption are given every encouragement to learn the language. Furthermore, students from abroad are encouraged to participate in Irish language and cultural events organised in the school and those
among them who take part are provided with starter-packs for Irish language learners. This approach is highly commended.

The two teachers of Irish have new and innovative plans for creating an Irish atmosphere in the school in general and in the classroom. They intend to raise the profile of Irish in the school and to give the students a wide experience of Irish as a living contemporary language. They have made a praiseworthy start on implementing these objectives by designing an interesting attractive programme for Transition Year and by planning outings and oral Irish events outside the classroom for the students during the school year. It is also intended that students will participate in a wide range of debating competitions and other Irish-language events outside the school. The teachers’ enthusiasm for, and interest in their work to date is commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It is already the norm for the Irish teaching staff to hold regular meetings. It was evident that they co-operate excellently and that they have agreed a set of objectives to be implemented within the coming few years. Because the Irish department is fairly small, the responsibilities for co-ordinating their efforts will be shared between the teachers, a satisfactory arrangement.

A very comprehensive plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was made available on the day of the evaluation. The plan comprises a praiseworthy mission statement drafted by the teachers of Irish, a description of the layout of classes and of the organisation of the Irish department. Information is also provided on methodologies, access to and use of information and communication technology (ICT), the range and use of resources in Irish classes and the elements of curriculum content to be covered at the different levels and with the various year-groups. It was clear that significant effort and work had been invested in drafting the plan and the excellent work of the teachers in this regard is commended. It is suggested that the teachers try making a minor change to the layout of the plan so that the methodologies, materials and resources, assessment methods and the curriculum content to be covered would all be presented on the same page. This method of presentation would show the integrated approach very clearly. The awareness of the need to review the plan and schemes of work on an ongoing basis, as evidenced by teachers’ notes concerning various lessons, is praiseworthy indeed.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in TY was also made available and it is evident that considerable efforts are being made to devise an interesting attractive programme which accords with the philosophy of Transition Year. The work done to date on the plan is commended. It is recommended that the programme be laid out on a week-by-week or on a modular basis.

Excellent planning and comprehensive preparation had been done for all the classes observed.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was a high standard of teaching and learning in Irish classes in Notre Dame School. Good practice could be seen in every aspect of teaching observed. The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching was excellent in the classes observed. Teachers did their best to use the target language at all times and Irish was also required of the students as the medium of all communication with the teachers. Every effort was made to avoid the use of translation from Irish to English and clever strategies were used to ensure that students understood the subject matter of the lesson.
Particularly remarkable were the easy atmosphere and the good teacher-pupil relationship observed in the Irish classrooms. The teachers had high expectations of their students and gave them recognition for their efforts and every encouragement to do their best, which students did in every class observed. Teachers’ effective use of their classroom space is commended, as is the change in layout of the rooms to suit the groups of students being taught and the activities involved.

Active teaching methods were used and plenty of opportunities to communicate in the target language were created for the students during the lessons. In classes where the students had a high standard of Irish, open debate and discussion of aspects of literature were used to encourage the students to talk. In other classes, where there were students who weren’t quite competent in the language as yet, pair activities were organised which helped students to form functional sentences in simple Irish. In all the lessons observed, there was a strong emphasis on activity, on participation and on continuous communication in the target language, at a level appropriate to the students’ ability.

One case was observed where a class was being taken by the two teachers in collaboration: traditional dance-steps were being taught to certain students in preparation for a céilí to be held in the school later in the week. The class was organised very effectively and the allocation of organisational and administrative responsibilities to students in the class is highly commended.

Irish grammar was taught very effectively during the classes observed. Glance-cards were used in one case and the teacher ensured that the students understood how to use them correctly and how to derive the required information from them. In general, the teaching of grammar was interwoven through the subject-matter of the various lessons observed. The linking of various aspects of Irish literature on the Leaving Certificate course is commended; this strategy helped to explain and contextualise literary themes for the students.

The whiteboard was effectively used to illustrate answers to questions, new vocabulary and other material for the students. Although the teachers did not have the opportunity of using ICT in their classes on the day of the evaluation, due to electrical problems in the school, it was evident from talking to the teachers and looking at their lesson-plans that ICT is regularly used, a commendable approach. Use was also made of VIFAX, an interactive learning programme, in one class observed and that resource was very helpful in presenting the subject-matter of the lesson to the students in an interesting way. In another case observed, a singing and musical item was being prepared for the parents’ concert and it was obvious that the students derived great pleasure and benefit from the various activities. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish ensure that they use a wide range of materials and resources to put the subject-matter of the lessons in a contemporary context for the students and to ensure that the stimulating, attractive approach used at present is maintained.

**ASSESSMENT**

In-school exams are organised at Christmas and in the summer. Parents are kept informed of their daughters’ progress through school reports, the homework diaries and annual parent-teacher meetings. Teachers and students agree learning targets every month during third and sixth year. This approach is highly commended as it places responsibility for learning squarely on the shoulders of the students themselves.

Every student in the school takes an Irish oral test as part of the summer exams. There will also be an oral component in the Christmas tests from the current year onwards. This approach is
commended. A letter was dispatched to the parents of all students in the school, explaining the changes in Irish scheduled for implementation in state exams in 2012. Parents were also informed about the advantages that students derive from spending some time attending a course in the Gaeltacht or a summer course in Irish.

There was a significant amount of work in the copybooks inspected. It was evident that student homework is regularly assigned and corrected. Careful, comprehensive correction had been done in the copybooks observed. Advice and guidance for improvement were offered, as well as correction of grammar mistakes. The teachers’ work in correcting students’ copybooks is praiseworthy indeed.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The commitment of the teachers of Irish to raising the profile of Irish in the school and to arranging for the students to experience Irish as a living language outside the classroom is highly commended.
- The high standard of subject planning for Irish was reflected in the teaching and learning observed.
- The teachers’ commitment to using the target language in their teaching is impressive.
- Effective teaching practice was followed in providing interactive teaching methodologies for the students, as well as opportunities for communication in the target language.
- There is planning for effective use of ICT in the teaching and learning of Irish.
- The teachers’ high expectations for their students are commended, as are the continuous praise and encouragement offered them in their learning of Irish.
- The practice of assessing the communicative skills of all the students in the school twice a year is commended.

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 school management consider the possibilities of providing an extra class-period per week for Irish for Transition Year students.
- It is recommended that the teachers of Irish ensure that a wide range of other materials and resources besides ICT, are used in their classes.

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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