An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Saint Joseph’s Academy
Kildare Town, County Kildare
Roll number: 61700W

Date of inspection: 27 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 Saint Joseph’s Academy. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the teaching and learning of 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 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

Saint Joseph’s Academy participates in the scheme Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Provision for Irish in the school’s curriculum is good. The Irish language teaching team comprises three teachers, two of whom take the majority of the classes. All teachers are fully qualified and their oral competency in Irish is satisfactory. Management deserves credit for providing the teachers with opportunities to teach Irish in the two cycles and at the different levels. As a part of the preliminary preparations being made for the amalgamation of schools in Kildare town in 2011, there is cooperation between this school and Presentation Secondary School to ensure students’ access to the broadest range of subjects and levels in both schools. In this regard it was stated that the current higher level fifth year students attend Irish classes in Presentation Secondary School.

The allocated time for Irish in the senior cycle is satisfactory. However, only four class periods are allocated to Irish in the junior cycle. It is recommended that management allocates one additional class period to at least one year in the junior cycle. The distribution of class periods throughout the week for each year group is balanced and this is good practice.

The students take examinations in Irish, English and Mathematics as part of the school transfer examination. The examination results are used to allocate the students to mixed-ability classes. This is good practice. At present the students in first year, and in second year, which contains two class groups, are in mixed-ability classes. Because the number of students in other year groups is also low, students study Irish at different levels within class groups.

Twenty one per cent of the overall enrolment is exempt from the study of Irish. Management organises classes in learning support, resource or English as an additional language contemporaneous with the Irish classes as far as possible, in order to cater appropriately for the
exempted students while their fellow students are taking their Irish classes. Management deserves credit in this regard. It was reported that exempted students who are present in Irish classes are encouraged to study the language. This practice is praiseworthy because the language belongs to everybody and it is important that all students are provided with inputs in the language and its culture.

The parents’ association deserves high praise for its support for the language and for the work being done to provide three scholarships for those students who are keen to attend summer colleges in the Gaeltacht. Information regarding this and other activities designed to provide opportunities for the students to use Irish outside of the formal classes should be included in the subject plan.

Management accepts requests for aids and resources from individual teachers. A good supply of aids and resources is available to the Irish teachers including broadband access in each classroom, a computer room and a laptop computer and data projector for staff use.

All staff members attended workshops organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish. It is recommended that in consultation with the teachers, management develops a feedback form to be completed by each staff member on return from such a workshop. The feedback form should include trigger questions based on the programme content and how the workshop would be of benefit to teaching and learning in the school as well as details regarding resources provided.

**Planning and Preparation**

A senior member of the Irish teaching team acts as subject co-ordinator. It would be preferable if each member performed this role in turn in order that they would be provided with an opportunity to undertake a leadership role and to develop associated skills. The department organises two formal meetings: at the beginning and end of the school year. The selection of textbooks and the allocation of students to classes are the main items for discussion. Agendas are not prepared for such meetings and minutes are not recorded. It is recommended that in consultation with teachers, management would prepare the agenda for formal meetings and that minutes are retained as a record of decisions and actions. A copy of the minutes should be made available to management and retained in the subject plan. In addition, it is recommended that methodologies and teaching and learning strategies are included as discussion items on the agenda for meetings and the discussion should include a particular focus on differentiation.

The subject plan was of low standard. The plan requires significant development and the work that needs to be done requires attention. There should be adherence to planning the subject content per term as was being done in the case of the plans provided. The following recommendations are made in order to guide the work: the aims and objectives for the plan should be extended, based on the syllabuses and the Irish learning needs of the students; a framework of the expected learning outcomes at the different stages and levels in the case of each year group, that will be based on the various language functions and skills, should be developed; the content should reflect the thematic integration of language skills’ development; the methodologies and teaching and learning strategies to be used in order to achieve the learning outcomes including details regarding subject differentiation, information and communications technology (ICT) and modes of assessment, should be specified. The plans should also include an account of the methodologies and strategies to be used. In addition the implementation of the plans should be monitored and reviewed regularly and any amendments required should be noted in the plans. Further to the recommendations recorded above, the teachers should base their plans for their own class groups on the department plan and agree a common plan in the case of classes.
undertaking a study of Irish at the same level in any year group. The general language of the class room and students’ correct pronunciation should be taken into consideration when planning the content for classes in first year.

Good quality was evident in the planning and preparation for most classes. In particular, the cases where resources were developed to tailor the subject to the students’ needs and where available aids and students’ learning styles were taken into account in the process, are particularly praiseworthy. In the minority of cases, it is recommended that it be ensured when planning and preparing that effective use is made of the available class contact time for the benefit of student learning and that the class content not be governed by the textbook.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in most of the classes observed was good. Good practice was noted in those cases where effective use was made of the available class contact time by having a definite structure on the work, by ensuring new learning for the students and where the tasks supported active learning.

The roll was not called in the case of most classes. It is good practice to call the roll at the beginning of each class period and it is recommended that the students be enabled to respond in Irish. Printed material which would support such activity was on display in one of the classrooms. In addition, it is recommended that a few minutes be devoted at the commencement of class to conversation in Irish on a suitable topic while the students are settling down.

In half of the classes observed, the material on which the activities were based was recorded on the blackboard, and in other cases the students were informed orally about the lesson topic. It is good practice to share the targeted new material with the students because it helps them develop their understanding of their learning and the connections between the lesson material and other elements of the course. In accordance with the recommendation which has been made already regarding planning for the subject, this practice should be developed in order that the expected learning outcomes are shared with the students at the commencement of the lesson. The vocabulary used should express what they would achieve as an outcome of the work done. It would also be worthwhile at the end of the lesson to ask the students to reflect on what they have learned and on how the learning was achieved.

Even though the students in the classes observed had a variety of tasks to complete, the tasks were not always used to develop the different language skills. A limited sample of pair work was observed. When assigning tasks to be completed in groups, the students should be given clear instructions and even have the teacher demonstrate the work involved to the whole class group, before they commence the task. One very good example of the integration of language skills based on a common theme was observed in one particular class in the junior cycle. It is recommended that this good practice, which supports the application and consolidation of learning and which accommodates students’ different learning styles, be extended as appropriate. In this regard it would be preferable if the selected aural comprehension text were based on the same theme. In the case where an activity such as a mock oral test is being conducted with a small number of students during a lesson, it is recommended that worksheets be prepared to give to the other students to be completed at the time and to ensure that they would have an input in the work.
The cases where effective use was being made of the different media to present the lesson material to the students are deserving of much praise. Particular praise is due to the manner in which the news of the previous night on TG4 was integrated with the correction of the homework. In another instance, pictures were used to present new vocabulary to the students. This helped to connect with the students’ prior learning and to avoid translation. When such material is being used, it is well to remember its potential to elicit additional conversation from the students. ICT was used effectively in a mixed-ability class during the preparatory work for a writing task. The manner in which the task was differentiated is also praised and such a practice should be extended.

The development of students’ language awareness was addressed through work on the accuracy of their pronunciation and their understanding of grammar at different levels in each class. While this is praiseworthy, the good practice observed in some instances of using the blackboard or other media such as the whiteboard, overhead projector or PowerPoint slides for example, to demonstrate differences and rules to the students should be extended. This would provide students with a visual representation of content being learned aurally. A similar approach should also be adopted to record answers so that the correct answer would be evident to each student who could then correct their own or their colleagues’ work as appropriate.

An excerpt of a television programme suitable for the particular age group was presented at the end of some lessons. Such a practice is commended because it highlights a medium through which the students themselves can access Irish outside the classroom setting. It would be of more benefit to the learning, however, if it had a definite function by connecting with the lesson material or by using it, for instance, as a text for an aural comprehension task.

A suitable range of questions was used in the majority of lessons. It is recommended that this aspect of the work be further developed and especially to ensure that the more able students are appropriately challenged.

Irish was used in the majority of classes as the medium of instruction and for classroom management. In one instance there was an over-emphasis on translation to English to assist students’ understanding of the content. As happened in most cases, other strategies should be used for such a purpose. Those instances where the students put questions to the teachers based on the lesson material are highly commended. Such practice is indicative of the use of Irish being the general practice in these classes. The materials on display in some classrooms were used to assist student learning. This practice is laudable.

ASSESSMENT

The school has homework and assessment policies which the Irish teachers implement. As part of the next review of these policies, it is recommended that the responsibilities of the various partners in their implementation should be clearer in them, that they should detail progress criteria and should be sufficiently flexible to incorporate the variety of skills to be developed in Irish. The date on which the policies are approved by the board of management and the expected review date should be recorded in the documents with a view to ensuring that an active planning cycle for the policies is maintained.

An appropriate range of assessment modes is used in senior classes. Included among them are the participation of the students in the classes, homework, and class and house tests in which the four main language skills are included. In accordance with the aims and objectives of the syllabus, all
the language skills should also be included in the assessment of student learning in junior cycle. In addition, and in accordance with the recommendation concerning planning, common examinations should be prepared in the case of classes taking Irish at the same level within year groups.

The results of the tests at Christmas are based on continuous assessment and formal examinations are conducted in the summer. In each of the classes observed, homework was corrected or checked and assigned in accordance with good practice. The sample of copybooks reviewed during the evaluation indicated that work on an appropriate range of material had been completed in the majority of classes. It was also evident that the work is corrected on a regular basis in some of the classes. Good practice was evident with regard to the correction of homework in copybooks from half of the classes observed. Detailed correction had taken place in such cases and the teacher’s signature, the date and the marks or grades awarded were attached to the work. Excellent practice was observed in the small sample where the work completed by the students was acknowledged and where shortcomings were highlighted for them, or where they were given guidance on ways to improve the work. The Irish department should agree a practice regarding the correction of homework based on assessment for learning (AFL). In this way the criteria for success could firstly be shared with the students and their understanding and ability to judge the quality of their own work could be developed. Additional information on AFL can be found on the internet at www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl.

In the majority of instances, the teachers maintained very good records of student achievement in the various examinations undertaken. The principal analyses student achievement in state examinations. It is recommended that the teachers take a more active role in this process and in this regard that they would also perform an analysis of student achievement in the house examinations. The outcomes of the analysis should inform planning and, as is appropriate, to amend the relevant plans. In addition, a report on the outcomes should also be available in the subject plan.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Good provision is being made for Irish and a good supply of aids and resources is available for teaching.
- Irish was being used in the majority of classes as the medium of instruction and classroom management.
- The weekly timetable shows a balanced allocation of time for the Irish class periods.
- First-year and second-year students are in mixed-ability classes.
- The quality of planning and preparation for most of the classes observed was good.
- The standard of teaching and learning was good in most classes observed.
- Examples were observed of the effective use of a range of media, including ICT, to present lesson content to the students.
- Work was undertaken on students’ language awareness in each class by developing their accuracy of pronunciation and their understanding of grammar at different levels.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• It is recommended that at least one additional lesson period be added to the amount of time allocated to Irish in the junior cycle.
• It is recommended that a comprehensive development of the plan for Irish be undertaken.
• It is recommended, as happened in most cases, that best use be made of the available class contact time on behalf of student learning, and that an over-reliance on textbooks be avoided.
• It is recommended that the expected learning outcomes be shared with students at the commencement of lessons and that the vocabulary used should express what they would achieve as an outcome of the work done.
• It is recommended that more emphasis is placed on the development of language skills in an integrated and differentiated manner as appropriate.
• It is recommended that all language skills are taken into consideration in the assessment of student learning in the junior cycle as occurs in senior cycle classes.
• It is recommended that the Irish department agrees a correction strategy based on assessment for learning.

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

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