An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Sexton St., Limerick
Roll number: 64250J

Date of inspection: 5 May 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School. 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 the subject teachers. 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

Junior-cycle students have four class periods of Irish per week and senior-cycle students have five. The system of allocation of students to classes varies from year to year in accordance with the varying needs of the different year groups. This approach is commended. Each student is encouraged to study Irish at the highest level best suited to her ability. This practice is praiseworthy. Each teacher is given the experience of teaching Irish in the various programmes and at the various levels, another practice which is commendable.

Forty-nine students have exemption from the study of Irish. Sixteen of these have learning difficulties and the remainder received their early education abroad. It was intimated that a number of students who are entitled to exemptions have opted to study Irish. These students merit particular praise, together with the teachers who support them. As regards the students who do not participate in the Irish lessons, an effort is made to organise learning support classes, or support classes in English as an Additional Language, for them while Irish lessons are in progress.

The management and teachers of Irish are aware of the importance of continuing professional development. It is a great source of satisfaction for them that the school is to participate in the Learning Schools Project during the coming school year. As part of this initiative, they intend to focus on Assessment for Learning. This is a worthwhile undertaking. The teachers of Irish have attended the inservice workshops on Irish organised by the Second Level Support Service. In addition, one of the Regional Officers visited the school to facilitate a workshop where teachers focussed on particular aspects of their classroom practice. The teachers are to be commended on their efforts to develop their skills as educators.

Irish is taught in different rooms throughout the school building. The teachers have attempted to create a stimulating learning environment in each room in which they teach Irish but there is a limit to what they can achieve as they, and the majority of students, are permanently on the move. The management is requested to consider the feasibility of designating a specific room for the
teaching of Irish. It would be of great assistance to the students, particularly when they are speaking, if reference aids showing common speech idioms, diagrams and vocabulary lists were to be displayed in this classroom. Additionally, it is felt that the resources accumulated by the teachers would be utilised more often and more effectively, were they to be made available in a central location such as in the Irish Room.

Co-curricular and cross-curricular events, which promote the use of Irish outside of class, are organised. It was reported that Irish Week constitutes a major occasion in the school calendar, during which a quiz, ceilidhs and various activities are organised. The positive attitude towards Irish projected by the school community, and particularly by the school staff, is of great assistance here. As a further illustration of this, it would be good if a small amount of Irish were to be included in the school stationery and signage, and in any correspondence or publications of the school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teaching staff embarked upon school development planning on a formal basis three years ago. Since then, the teachers of Irish have been active in subject development planning and their current focus is on the accumulation of learning and teaching resources. The teachers are commended for their efforts to make use of alternative materials rather than the textbook alone. Modern materials which are multi-coloured and interactive are most encouraging to students and the flash cards and posters now available are of great assistance to them. As this collection of resources is added to, it would be worthwhile cataloguing each item in the Irish plan and specifying where it is stored; specific reference should be made to these resources in the work schemes and the use which individual teachers make of them should be discussed at departmental meetings. It was reported that a data projector will shortly be made available in each classroom and teachers are requested to create as many opportunities as possible for the use by students of ICT.

The Irish plan was reviewed. The department has completed the planning template of the School Development Planning Initiative and it gives an indication of what is done to promote Irish both inside and outside of Irish classes. It would be beneficial if this document were available electronically in order that it might be revised and updated as the planning process advances.

Minutes of meetings are included in the subject plan. They showed that the staff members come together to discuss matters such as examinations, the grouping of students, examination results, co-curricular and cross-curricular events, and so forth. It constitutes good practice that this type of collaboration exists and teachers are asked to avail of the opportunities presented by these meetings to discuss classroom practice. For example, it would be worthwhile debating the ways in which the Assessment for Learning strategies, being implemented and previously implemented in class, have succeeded.

Teachers had prepared for lessons in that they had decided beforehand which activities would be undertaken by the students. Those lessons in which a theme was discussed, and where there was a thematic link between the various lesson tasks, were particularly successful. It was apparent that certain teachers had given prior thought to the aspects of language which were to be covered in the lesson. They chose appropriate methodologies, resources and learning activities which would create opportunities for the students of practising and acquiring new elements of the language. It was felt, however, that a greater emphasis had been placed on individual words than on sentences
and communication. Teachers are requested, when planning lessons in future, to direct greater attention to the language functions relating to the theme in hand. These functions are outlined on page 17 of the Junior Cycle Syllabus.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three Irish classes were observed in the course of the visit. These were junior-cycle classes. Irish prevailed in all these classes in that the teachers addressed their pupils through the medium of the Irish. On the whole, students displayed a good understanding of the teachers’ speech and, when given the opportunity, some students made commendable efforts to speak the language. It was mainly by means of direct questioning that opportunities for speaking Irish were created for the students. In one instance, the manipulation of language structures was practised orally. This is worthwhile as by hearing a phrase and using it repeatedly, students succeed in internalising it. However, teachers are asked not to overemphasise artificial communication such as this, but to allow the students to engage in true communication. With this in mind, they must devise language exercises and games which will require the students to make use of the same phrases. There are many sample tasks to be found on the internet at www.slss.ie/gaeilge.

During one lesson, students were set to working in pairs. They enjoyed this interaction and undertook the task with enthusiasm. It is strongly recommended that the use of practices which put students in communication with one another should be extended. Teachers are reminded of the benefits of giving students the freedom to compose questions, express opinions, give instructions and compose sentences themselves.

For the majority of the time, the learning activities initiated were well varied. Positive learning outcomes were observed mostly in cases where a thematic link existed between the activities. The results were even better where the variety of activities generated opportunities for the practice of the four skills of language – listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is recommended that the basic principle of integrating the four language skills should be implemented extensively in Irish classes and that students should be assigned tasks which ensure that they consolidate the newly acquired language in various ways. It is in the interest of the effective acquisition of the newly-taught language that teachers are reminded that it would be advisable for them to decrease the amount of talking they themselves do during lessons.

On the whole, good work was being done in the Irish classes observed and a courteous, collaborative atmosphere pervaded them. Particular note was taken of the way in which many teachers availed of as many opportunities as possible of praising their students. Special commendation is accorded to the teachers for cultivating the self-confidence of the students in their care. In addition to that, teachers have done much in order to make their students competent in Irish and the positive attitude projected by every student towards Irish is heartening.

ASSESSMENT

Methods of assessing the progress of students include informal monitoring of their participation in class activities, homework, class tests and in-house examinations. There is an emphasis on continuous assessment, especially in the case of students involved in the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. It is recommended that practice of continuous assessment be further extended. Teachers’ attention is drawn to the importance of cultivating the
speaking skills of students and it would be advisable that a mark would be awarded for the on-going efforts of every student to speak Irish during Irish lessons.

The management and teaching staff are aware of the benefits to be gained from homework. Many strategies have been devised in order to encourage students to undertake homework tasks regularly and with care. It was reported that the Homework Competition organised this year for first and second years was very successful. A competitive spirit was generated between the teams, which gave rise to collaboration between students as well as pride in their work.

Samples of the students’ written work were examined. Many students had completed a lot of written tasks of various kinds. This work had been monitored regularly and in some cases the feedback from the teacher gave an indication to students of the standard being attained by them. It is felt that it would be of great benefit to students if they were to be given more comprehensive feedback as to how they might attain even higher standards. Many of the strategies associated with Assessment for Learning focus on this particular aspect of learning. The participation of the school in the Learning Schools Project is therefore welcomed, as it is their intention to explore in more detail Assessment for Learning as part of that project.

In-house examinations are administered at Christmas time and in summer, as well as mock examinations for the certificate examination classes. Reports are sent home after all the principal examinations. In addition, meetings between parents and teachers are organised once a year also.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The staff members project a positive attitude towards Irish.
- Students are encouraged to undertake the study of Irish at the highest level best suited to their abilities.
- The benefits accruing from continuing professional development are acknowledged.
- The teachers are aware of the advantages to be gained from using authentic materials as teaching and learning resources.
- The management recognises the significant role played by ICT in everyday life, and the necessity of creating for students as many opportunities as possible for using ICT.
- On the whole, the teachers had made satisfactory preparation for the lessons observed.
- A courteous, collaborative atmosphere pervaded all the classes observed.
- Every opportunity of praising the students for their participation was availed of.
- Irish was the language in use in the classes observed.
- Opportunities were created for interaction between students.
- Students were assigned a range of tasks during lessons.
- There is a comprehensive system of assessment in place which keeps all participants informed of the progress being made.

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

- The feasibility of setting a specific room aside for Irish should be investigated.
- It is recommended that use would be made of strategies which create more opportunities for interaction between students.
• It is recommended that use be made of teaching, learning and assessment strategies which create greater balance between the practice of the four language skills.

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