

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Curragh Post-Primary School
Curragh, County Kildare
Roll number: 706600**

Date of inspection: 9 March 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Curragh Post-Primary School. 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 the teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and with the 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 teachers of Irish. 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

There is good support for Irish and satisfactory provision is made for it. At the time of the evaluation three teachers were teaching Irish in the school. Most classes had been allocated to a fully-qualified teacher who had long experience of teaching Irish in the school. Another staff member who did not have Irish as a degree subject had been allocated one class. Shortly before this evaluation visit, there was a change in the Irish-teaching team and the management had addressed this issue by recruiting a retired teacher on a temporary basis until the end of the school year. This teacher, who was not present on the day of the evaluation, had been allocated a number of classes for Irish. The competence in spoken Irish of the teacher responsible for most of the classes was satisfactory for the purpose of teaching. It was evident that there were limitations in the other teacher's oral language proficiency. It is recommended that management take a teacher's competence in Irish into account when allocating classes and that they make appropriate supports and guidance available as necessary.

Although the number of class-periods allocated to Irish in the senior cycle is very good, the total amount of time available is not satisfactory in the case of each class group. In the case of fifth year, for example, all the class periods available to them throughout the week are of 35 minutes duration each, although there are 40-minute periods in the timetable also. It is recommended that management ensures a better distribution of the amount of time available for classes. In the case of junior cycle, the provision for first years is very good, with five class periods per week available, but only four class periods per week are provided for second and third years. The distribution of class periods throughout the week reflects good practice, in so far as each class group has a single class per day. This arrangement is praiseworthy because it creates opportunities to provide students with regular inputs of the language.

There is a very good provision of aids and resources for Irish. Two of the teachers have their own classrooms, every teacher has a laptop, whiteboards are available and data projectors are permanently located in the classrooms. This provision is highly commended. The teachers of Irish

themselves recognise that there is considerable variety in their levels of skill in using the resources available and that these needs must be addressed. To cope with these deficiencies and ensure student access to information and communication technology (ICT) as a learning tool, it is reported that team teaching is fairly regularly used, for which two class groups are brought together in the computer room. This is a very good example of a teaching team who work co-operatively and share their skills for the benefit of learning.

Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Week) is celebrated with a range of events which afford opportunities for the students to broaden their experience of Irish. It was reported, and evidence was available to support it, that other members of the school teaching staff make a special effort to speak Irish during Irish Week. This whole-school support is very important for the language as a medium of communication. The Vocational Education Committee Gaeltacht scholarships scheme is availed of to help students spend some time in the Gaeltacht. This work is highly commended.

It was reckoned that nineteen per cent of all enrolled students had an exemption from the study of Irish. Included on the list were a few students who did not have an official exemption. Management is reminded to inform parents and students of the provisions of Circular M10/94, as well as the implications of awarding an unofficial exemption. It was reported, and observed in classes visited, that every student is encouraged to study Irish at a challenging level, commensurate with their ability.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The operation of the department of Irish is very well organised. It was evident that there was a very good, open level of communication and co-operation among the teachers who were present on the day of the evaluation. A member of the team assumes the role of co-ordinator, they hold regular meetings, agendas are laid out for the meetings and minutes are kept. Because the department of Irish is small, it would be worthwhile for the management to consider the possibility of convening meetings of language teachers in general periodically, to share experience, skills and good practice and to broaden their use across the curriculum.

Good progress has been made in developing a subject plan. Clear aims and objectives have been laid out for the teaching and learning of the subject. As part of the subject plan, schemes of work were drawn up on a term-by-term basis and on a week-by-week basis for individual classes. Particularly praiseworthy is the template used for planning for first year, because it is focused on the expected learning outcomes instead of on a list of topics and because it was developed collaboratively. It is recommended that teachers now build on this work and set out the learning outcomes expected at various stages throughout the school year and at the different levels. The language functions mentioned in the syllabuses and the various language skills should be taken into account in this work. Additionally, the plans should indicate the incremental development of students' language awareness and should place a special emphasis on the syntax and phonetics of Irish. The teaching and learning methodologies and strategies, among them assessment, as well as the aids and resources to be used to achieve the stated learning outcomes, should also be outlined in the plan. As part of the development work to be undertaken on the plan, and considering that there could be further changes of staff in the department, it is recommended that the teachers set out a clear account of the teaching and learning methodologies and strategies they use and that the general classroom language necessary should be included in the subject content for first year. The minutes of staff meetings indicated that the first-year plan was being monitored. This is very good practice.

Very good preparation had been done for the classes observed and particularly impressive was the work undertaken to develop ICT resources which supported the encouragement of students' active participation.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning of Irish was good. In accord with good practice, the roll was called and answered in Irish in every class. It would be worthwhile, at the start of class, to spend a short while talking to the students in Irish about a topical subject, while they are settling down for the class.

At the outset of every class, the students were informed of the lesson content. An example of particularly good practice was the case where students' prior learning was checked by asking them what they had learnt in their last Irish class and where the relevance of what they would learn in the class which was about to begin was explained to them. It is laudable that the teachers are conscious of how important it is that students understand their learning and the links between the work of various classes and between the different aspects of the courses. In accord with recommendations about this same area, in that part of this report which concerns planning, it is recommended that the teachers share the expected learning outcomes with the students. Teachers should make sure they use wording which would let students know what they would be able to do, or what they would know, by the end of class. Students should also be afforded the opportunity of reflecting, at the end of class, on what they have learnt and prompt questions should be used for this purpose.

Work was done on various aspects of the courses, in accord with the requirements of the syllabuses, in the classes observed. Although students were assigned various tasks in the majority of the classes, the teacher was too central to the activities. It is necessary, therefore, to achieve a better balance in such cases between the teacher's input and that of the students, to give the class more responsibility for their learning. Particularly praiseworthy are those cases in which the tasks chosen helped to create opportunities for the students to take an active part in the work, and supported the integration of the development of the various language skills. A class observed, where students were being prepared for the oral Irish examination, was an example of good practice. In keeping with good practice the extracts involved were first played for the students and availed of to develop their accuracy of pronunciation. This practice of using listening texts to develop the accuracy of students' pronunciation should be extended and reading texts could also be used in this work. Such work should be included in the subject plan for first year classes. Very laudable also was the use made of the texts to check students' knowledge of the genitive case and of tenses of verbs, for example. While such work is in progress, the material should also be used to create links with the literature course.

Pair work or group work was used in over half the classes observed. It is very important that students have opportunities like this to speak Irish to one another, and particularly to ask questions of one another. They must, however, have the language necessary to carry out the tasks set for them. Therefore the language needed by the students to do the work through Irish should be taken into account when planning tasks and should be available to them during the lesson, where necessary. Slides and posters could be used to display the vocabulary or phrases necessary. In one case, where the aim of the group work was that the students should write a story, the same series of pictures was distributed to every group, a series which was too long to complete the task satisfactorily, considering the limited time available in class. Drama, gesticulation and printed matter which was on display were very cleverly used when the teacher was gathering phrases and

vocabulary based on the pictures and recording them on the whiteboard. The work should, however, be more precisely structured, in order to support the students in undertaking the task in groups. It would be preferable, for example, to give just one picture to each group at first – a different picture for every group – then to assign a specific role to each group member, to allow a certain time for brain storming about vocabulary and phrases, to gather feedback from every group and record it and then distribute the full series of pictures or show them on screen to complete the task.

A very effective example was observed, of the creative use of the ICT aids and resources available in a classroom to develop students' understanding of directions. They were also used to let the students practise giving directions and following directions, and because the students were organised in groups of two or more, this helped them to co-operate in their learning.

Irish was used as the language of instruction and communication in most classes. In one case, there was over-emphasis on translation to or from English, a practice which considerably reduced the number of opportunities available to the students to hear themselves and their classmates speaking Irish and to develop their confidence in using it. Plenty of examples of the use of other very effective strategies to avoid translation were observed and such strategies should be more widely used.

There was an easy, positive relationship, based on mutual respect, between teacher and students in every class. The students undertook the work set for them quite well. The students were making satisfactory progress in their learning in most cases.

Although the teachers are highly commended for the use they had made of the classroom walls and of the furniture and other apparatus in the rooms to enhance the use of Irish in the environment, nevertheless, in one case, the material on display should be updated more regularly. Students' help could be enlisted for this task, and, for example, there could be a particular focus or theme running through the material at various times throughout the school year.

ASSESSMENT

Student progress is regularly monitored through homework, class tests and house examinations, as well as 'mock' state examinations in the case of third and sixth years. The school has a homework policy which the teachers of Irish implement. In accordance with good practice, homework is regularly assigned and corrected in the case of every class observed. Based on a review of a sample of students' homework diaries, it is considered necessary to develop students' skills in using these diaries as a means of supporting their learning. The examples of students' written work reviewed indicated that the work was very well organised.

Although it is specifically mentioned in the plan for fifth year that there is an emphasis on listening, speaking and writing in the assessment carried out, it transpired that oral Irish is not part of the assessment of this year group, nor of any other year group except sixth year. It is recommended that the recognised best practice of assessing all of the four main language skills be adopted in the school as general practice when assessing students' learning in every year group. This practice would accord closely with the aims and objectives of the syllabuses for Irish, in both cycles. As well as that, the learning outcomes set out for the different year groups and levels should be used as assessment criteria.

The corrections on written work inspected indicated that the students get recognition and praise for their work. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish agree an approach to correction based on the principles of assessment for learning. This would mean that students would get recognition for work well and correctly done, that gaps in their learning would be indicated to them and that they would get guidance on ways of improving their work. Further information on assessment for learning is available at www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl.

The teachers implement the good practice of keeping very good records of student achievements in the various examinations they take. The management and teachers analyse student achievements in the certificate examinations and account is taken of them in the planning. This is good practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good support for Irish and satisfactory provision is made for it.
- Every class group has a single class period for Irish per day, an arrangement which provides students with a regular input of the language.
- Although there are gaps in team member's ICT skills, team-teaching is fairly regularly used to ensure student access to ICT as a learning instrument.
- The operation of the department of Irish is very well organised and it was evident that there was a very good, open level of communication and co-operation among the teachers.
- Good progress has been made in developing the subject plan.
- The quality of teaching and learning in Irish was good.
- There was a smooth, positive relationship, based on mutual respect, between the teachers and students in every class, and the students approached their work well.
- Student progress is regularly monitored and the teachers keep very good records.
- Homework is regularly assigned and corrected and the examples of students' written work reviewed were very well organised.

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

- It is recommended that management take a teacher's competence in Irish into account when allocating classes and to provide support and guidance where necessary.
- It is recommended that management implements the provisions of Circular M10/94 in the case of every application for an exemption from the study of Irish.
- It is recommended that the planning work done for first year be built on, and that the expected learning outcomes at various stages throughout the school year and at the different levels also be developed for the other year groups. These should be shared with the students and used as assessment criteria.
- It is recommended that teachers ensure, through the class activities chosen, that there is a better balance between the teacher's input and that of the students, so that the students would have more opportunities of hearing themselves and their classmates using the language and of developing confidence in doing so.

- It is recommended that it be the normal practice to take account of the four main language skills when assessing students' learning in each year group and that an approach to correction, based on the principles of assessment for learning, be developed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal and at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.