

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**St Brigid's Vocational School
Loughrea, County Galway.
Roll number: 71280J**

Date of inspection: 27 April 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | 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 St Brigid's Vocational School, Loughrea, County Galway. 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. 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

School timetabling arrangements are very supportive of the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. Four single class periods per week are provided in junior cycle and five single class periods in senior cycle. In addition, leaving certificate students have an extra class period. In general, the number of Irish class groups in each year is satisfactory from the point of view of the average numbers in each group. Classes in first year and in Transition Year (TY) are mixed ability in nature. Students in the other classes in the school are organised according to levels being taken in the State examinations. Classes are timetabled concurrently to facilitate movement between the different examination levels. Students are given every encouragement to study at higher level for as long as possible during both cycles. It is clear from the minutes of departmental meetings that students must have gained a 'C' grade in Irish in the junior certificate higher level paper in order to study Irish at higher level in senior cycle. A review of this requirement is recommended in the interest of offering every student an open and equal choice.

A total of 9.3% of the student population has an exemption from studying Irish. The vast majority of these students have specific learning difficulties and a small number have received their early education outside the State. School management makes every effort to be vigilant in relation to the management of exemptions by including a question on the enrolment form for incoming students.

Teachers of Irish have their own designated classrooms containing additional teaching and learning resources. Access to television sets, CDs, DVDs and overhead projectors is readily available to teachers. In recent years significant development of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure has taken place and as a result the vast majority of classrooms now have a data projector. A computer room is also available on a booking system. ICT training for teachers is being offered in the school on an ongoing basis. The school's ICT team in collaboration with school management is congratulated on the development of ICT provision in recent years.

While there is no dedicated budget for Irish, school management and the *Timire Gaeilge* (Irish Language Development Officer) of County Galway Vocational Education Committee (VEC) are generous in funding resources for the language. The Irish department is collecting resources to enhance teaching and learning and these materials are stored in one of the Irish classrooms. It was stated that every member of the department has appropriate access to this collection. It is recommended that the resources lists for post-primary students available on the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and on the website www.cogg.ie be used as references when the Irish department is adding to teaching and learning resources in the future.

All teachers of Irish in the school are graduates in Irish. It is commendable that the vast majority of the teachers teach Irish in both cycles. However, in the school year 2009/10, only two teachers are teaching higher level classes in senior cycle and the other four teachers have only limited contact with higher level classes in junior cycle. It is recommended that these arrangements be reviewed and that every teacher be afforded the same opportunity to teach the different examination levels in both cycles. Members of the department have experience of being involved in Irish colleges during the summer and of working with the certificate examinations as oral examiners or as examiners of written papers. School management provides every encouragement and support to teachers of Irish to attend continuing professional development (CPD) training and representatives from the Irish department attend workshops for Irish organised by the SLSS. It is recommended that these representatives share the information gained from the in-service courses with the other members of the Irish team on a formal basis to ensure that every member is fully informed of the recommendations of these courses. A copy of materials from each in-service workshop should be included as a source of reference in the plan for Irish.

A wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities in Irish are organised in the school. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is an important occasion on the school calendar with *céilí* dancing, competitions, drama, and quizzes organised throughout the week. Certain year groups visit the Aran Islands and students participate in various competitions organised by *TG4* and *Raidió na Gaeltachta*. There is a tradition in TY of participation in quiz competitions and distinctions at both regional and national levels have been achieved. A certain number of scholarships to attend courses in the Gaeltacht are awarded every year by County Galway VEC to students who are not taking State examinations. The teachers who endeavour to promote Irish language and culture both inside and outside the school are highly commended for their diligence.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

School development planning (SDP) has been ongoing on a formal basis in St Brigid's for a number of years. The Irish teachers meet formally four times during the school year. As is appropriate, the subject plan for Irish contains minutes of these meetings. Included on the agenda of these meetings are: student examination results; class lists; allocation of class periods; resources and common examinations for first year students. It is recommended that time be made available during these meetings for collaborative preparation of curricular plans for the different year groups and for the various examination levels. Teachers also meet regularly on an informal basis.

The Irish department has a subject coordinator with a clearly defined function. This role is rotated among colleagues by agreement. However, it is important that all members of the team be afforded the opportunity to gain experience of the leadership skills involved in the role of coordinator. The role of coordinator should be rotated every two years. This arrangement would facilitate continuity in terms of planning objectives.

A long term framework, containing a list of topics, textbooks and other resources, has been included in the plans for teaching and learning in the case of the vast majority of year groups. It is recommended that this framework be developed into schemes of work which specify the learning objectives for the teaching and learning themes; timeframes; methodologies; resources and assessment methods. Examples of this integrated planning are available in the guidelines *Treoirínite mar Thaca le Múineadh an Chúrsa Leasaithe Litríochta* published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Within this collaborative planning process, it is also recommended that the same work programme be agreed for the teaching of literature in the first term for fifth-year students who move from higher to ordinary level.

It is recommended that an action plan be devised to ensure the strategic development of the Irish department. Recommendations from this report in addition to the priorities of the Irish department should form an integral part of this plan. A time frame for the action plan must be agreed as well as assigning members of the team to achieve these targets. It is recommended that the work of the department be reviewed on a regular basis and that a record of review findings be included in the plan.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Short term planning and the teaching and learning materials prepared by teachers for their classes were of a very good standard in the majority of lessons evaluated. Particular praise is due to teachers for the amount of ICT used to support teaching and learning. This good work was a positive addition to lessons from the point of view of structure, pace and clarity of lesson content. It is recommended that this good practice be used by all members of the team. When planning and short term preparation is being undertaken it is recommended that, as a general rule, student learning objectives should be differentiated to reflect the range of abilities in the classes. Teachers should also ensure that work sheets include a specific task to challenge students with a high level of proficiency in the language.

In all classes teachers shared the lesson theme with students. Classes were most effective where teachers explained the lesson stages and the associated learning objectives. It is recommended that a debriefing session be included at the end of lessons so that students are afforded an opportunity to identify their own learning outcomes in line with their ability, an approach which fosters independence in learners also. In those classes where planning and short-term preparation had not been done as effectively not all the learning possibilities were realised. When short term planning is being carried out it is recommended that teachers take cognisance of the fact that there are three main parts to lesson delivery: presentation, activity and a debriefing session on what has been achieved.

All teachers managed their classes well and in some cases a high standard of class management was evident. Teachers had good knowledge of and familiarity with the students in their care. This enabled students to be at ease which increased their participation in the classes. At all times students' efforts and opinions were received with encouraging affirmation and this enhanced the teaching and learning atmosphere.

The most common teaching and learning methodology in evidence during the inspection visit was oral questioning between teachers and students. This technique was most successful when the presentation was varied in terms of teaching and learning materials employed, when language skills were integrated and the lesson in which pair work was used. A PowerPoint presentation

based on a topic which was closely related to student interest and experience was used in three of these classes. In each case, very good pre-skill work was carried out on understanding the target vocabulary as well as focusing student attention on sounds as preparation for reading, as is appropriate. During questioning grammar points were well synthesised and student answers were recorded. Teachers are to be congratulated on the use of these effective techniques. As an alternative approach to questioning between teachers and students during classes, it is recommended that students be put in pairs which would provide students with an opportunity to practise together their productive and receptive language skills.

In the class where all of the language skills were integrated very good pre-skill work on the vocabulary of the tape was carried out by means of a PowerPoint presentation which showed a mindfulness of the variety of learning styles present in the class. When a listening comprehension test is being conducted, it is recommended that teachers move around the class to assist individual students especially those who have difficulty with the listening comprehension. In one class there was good balance between student activity and teacher input as effective use was made of group work to reinforce oral exercise. Even though the student pairs had defined tasks and the teacher provided comprehensive scaffolding for the needs of the students, a time for the activity had not been agreed in advance. As a result of this the work carried out by the pairs lacked a meaningful pace from the beginning and all learners were not on task at the end of the activity. It is recommended that a time is allocated for group work in advance. It is also beneficial to conduct a feedback session with students after the group activity to review their learning. In one mixed-ability class a work sheet with a series of questions based on an excerpt from a television programme was used as material for the lesson. It is recommended that these questions be differentiated in terms of the levels of understanding and of learning expectations required. Such an approach would better serve the different levels in the class and would, in turn, further challenge every student to participate in the lesson.

Good use was made of the whiteboard and/or PowerPoint in the vast majority of classes and to illustrate the structure of the lesson. It was common practice to have the day, date and month written on the board. The board was also used to record and correct homework and to present keywords during lessons. In addition to these techniques the spelling of new words and grammar points were illustrated on the board. All these approaches enhance student learning are to be commended, especially in the case of students whose preferred learning style is visual. It is recommended that all Irish teachers make more widespread use of clear, ordered recording on the board.

Irish was the language in use in all classroom interactions. This approach is to be commended as it is frequently the case that the teacher is the sole model students have of pronunciation and correct use of the language. In general, students had a good standard of Irish together with a good understanding of the lesson content and they willingly participated in the use of the target language when given the opportunity. All teachers succeeded in simplifying their language through the use of gestures, thus avoiding the overuse of the translation method. Teachers focused student attention on grammar points in the communicative context of a passage rather than teaching grammar as separate, individual units. In some classes students were given vocabulary to learn as homework. It is recommended that words to be learned should be grouped together rather than giving students words or idioms to learn in isolation. It is recommended that the Irish department teaches vocabulary learning strategies explicitly.

Teachers are classroom based. All teachers have created stimulating physical environments which include charts with points of grammar; proverbs; some helpful vocabulary for use in class interaction; website addresses and other visual materials. It is recommended that the type of

vocabulary students require to express themselves and communicate misunderstandings or difficulties be displayed on wall charts for all the different year groups.

ASSESSMENT

A short description of the whole-school approaches developed for homework is included as part of the student diary. It is recommended that a whole-school assessment policy be formulated to include the homework policy. In doing this reference should be made to the assessment for learning material available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. Students and parents, in particular, should be central to the development of an assessment policy. The Irish department will be able to develop approaches for assessment within this whole-school framework.

A random sample of student diaries showed that homework in Irish was being assigned regularly in some cases while in other instances the record was irregular. While parents or guardians sign the diaries monitoring by tutors is rare. A review of this practice is recommended in keeping with the guidelines in the homework statement in the diaries. In the vast majority of diaries there was an emphasis on written work and on memorising. However listening comprehension tasks were included in the diaries of certain year groups. This practice is to be commended. It is strongly recommended that all members of the Irish team include a variety of language skills in the homework tasks they set. In some cases recording of homework was in Irish only or was bilingual. Teachers who exploit the opportunity of homework recording as a source of teaching and learning are to be congratulated.

It was evident from a sample of copybooks examined during the inspection visit that a good deal of work had been completed on a range of material, in line with syllabus requirements. Copybooks showed continuity in the work done with a good level of development and the notes in some folders were of a high standard. Examples of best practice were evident where visual strategies for teaching tenses in the different persons were presented in two sets of folders and the criteria for good essay writing in another folder. These teachers were fostering organisational skills in their students, through systematically keeping notes on the various aspects of the course in different copybooks or folders from first year onwards. This is no small achievement and staff members are to be commended for promoting the organisational skills of the students in their care.

A variety of practices in relation to corrections was evident in the random sample of student copybooks examined. One series of copybooks had both mechanical corrections of grammar mistakes and developmental corrections which gave clear guidance for learning. It is recommended that this be the practice of all members of the department. In the case of correction of syntax, good practices, which were not excessive, were in use. Teachers are to be congratulated on the use of these techniques which add to the learning of students from corrections.

It was evident from a series of students' TY copybooks that not much work had been completed since the beginning of the school year and that the monthly study programme set out in the plan for TY had not been achieved. It is recommended that this matter be reviewed without delay to ensure that appropriate learning expectations are set for the year and so that students achieve these learning objectives. Some copybooks also contained long passages in English. It is recommended that the practice of resorting too frequently to the use of the translation method be reviewed.

A range of formative assessment methods is used in class to monitor and assess the learning process and student progress. These include correction of homework on a daily basis, tests held at the end of topics and monthly examinations. Formative strategies were in evidence during the inspection visit. There was oral questioning at different levels in classes, pair and individual work as well as good support for student needs in some classes where students were completing active learning tasks.

All students take summative assessments twice in the school year. Every student participates in the house examinations at Christmas time; pre-examinations are held in the spring for students taking the certificate examinations and end-of-year examinations are held for those students not taking State examinations. It was stated that teachers make every effort to base these summative examinations on common aspects of the course and the four language skills are included. This good practice and is highly commended. Two reports are sent home annually based on the results of these examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Good support is provided for teaching and learning Irish in St Brigid's Vocational School and ICT has been incrementally developed.
- Short term planning and materials prepared by teachers for their classes were of a very good standard in the majority of lessons evaluated.
- In the vast majority of classes observed during the inspection visit good teaching and learning techniques and methodologies were employed.
- The school has developed systematic approaches for homework and assessment.

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

- It is desirable that more evenly balanced access to teaching classes in both cycles and at all examination levels be available to all teachers. It is important also that all members of the team be afforded the opportunity to gain experience of the leadership skills associated with the role of subject coordinator.
- It is recommended that significant development be carried out on the curriculum plans. The planning process should ensure that the language is taught thematically and in an integrated manner across all aspects of the syllabus. In addition, an action plan should be devised to guide the strategic development of the department.
- Short-term planning and preparation for teaching and learning should include differentiated student learning outcomes, in keeping with the range of abilities in the classes. It is recommended that the good teaching and learning methodologies in evidence during some lessons should be shared with all members of the team.
- It is recommended that a whole-school assessment policy be developed which would include the homework policy that has been formulated. The Irish department could develop approaches to assessment within this whole-school framework with emphasis placed on the four main language skills.

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

