An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Gairmscoil Fheichín Naofa,
Corr na Móna,
County Galway.

Roll number: 71320S

Date of inspection: 29 April 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Gairmscoil Fheichín Naofa, Corr na Móna, 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 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 one member of the teaching staff. 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

Gairmscoil Fheichín Naofa is situated in the Seoighe Gaeltacht District in east Connemara on the border between Galway and Mayo. The Irish language is a distinctive element of the Irish culture in this outlying Gaeltacht district. The school has a central role in the protection and promotion of Irish among the surrounding community. Students attend this school from different language backgrounds and Irish is not the home language in the case of the vast majority of the students. The school has developed a policy for Irish since January 2009 where the school context, statutory obligations, and the aims and objectives of the whole school community in relation to Irish are laid out clearly. It is recommended that an action plan be designed within this policy framework with practical quantifiable steps, which would assist the implementation of the school’s vision regarding Irish for the whole school community. Irish has a strong presence in the school and Irish is the language of communication and administration in the school. Management gives every encouragement and great support to the staff to attend ongoing professional inservice courses. The school has made many links with initiatives associated with the language and with institutions involved in the teaching and learning of Irish. The teachers have fully participated in the courses being provided by the Second Level Support Services (SLSS). The school deserves the highest praise for its commitment to developing its language teaching and learning techniques on an ongoing basis.

Very favourable provision is devoted to the teaching and learning of Irish in terms of the number of class periods and their distribution on the timetable. All class groups are organised on a mixed-ability basis.

All teachers involved in the teaching and learning of Irish are graduates in Irish. One of these teachers teaches both cycles at the different examination levels, and this approach is recommended as far as possible for every teacher so that the department will have the relevant experience to teach the subject from first-year to Leaving Certificate. The school has a language assistant and, in consultation with the teachers of Irish and management, provides support to
students with limited Irish and to students in junior cycle with identified learning difficulties. The plan for Irish contains a detailed description of this support, a practice which is commendable.

There is a dedicated room for Irish and Irish is also being taught in other rooms. Good resources in terms of information and communication technology (ICT) have been provided. A very good collection of and teaching and learning resources and materials has been compiled by the department, together with an extensive list of sources contained in the plan for Irish to develop this collection. There is a library with a substantial range of books and an Irish book reading scheme was commenced this year. The department has carried out significant work regarding the development of multi-media lessons, which augments the students’ teaching and learning experience in the classroom and adds to learners’ independent learning, given student access to these resources electronically and on mobile equipment. The department deserves great praise for this proactive work.

The school carries out excellent work in relation to co-and extra-curricular activities. These extensive activities help greatly with the implementation of both the aims and objectives of the Irish department and the whole-school targets for Irish among the students, the school community, and in the surrounding district. Everybody involved in all these projects is heartily congratulated.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There was a high standard in the collaborative planning being carried out by staff members on a formal and informal basis. The teachers meet as a team once during each term, and good minutes are maintained as part of the plan. The principal attends a number of these meetings, or a report is forwarded to the principal outlining the decisions and recommendations arising from the shared discussion. The classroom assistant also attends these meetings as required. The department and management are congratulated for affording such priority to language planning.

The department has developed a comprehensive policy for Irish and all the organisational details of the department are contained in the plan. The good linkages developed between the Irish and the learning-support departments are commendable. The plan recognised the need for developing differentiated strategies in teaching and learning. It is recommended that such differentiated techniques should be taken into consideration in the design of short-term plans, in defining learning outcomes in particular. It is commendable that the whole-school policies relevant to the teaching and learning of Irish are also included in the plan. Curriculum plans for delivery of the curriculum are set out on a termly basis for all the year groups. The work which has been carried out in these plans in terms of topics, timeframes and language skills is commendable. It is recommended that such good practice be further developed by planning for the thematic teaching of the language, articulated in terms of student learning outcomes across the language skills in accordance with such themes. The recommendations in the *Guidelines in support of Teaching the Revised Course of Literature* from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) will be of value as a reference point for this collaborative work. These guidelines are available on the SLSS website for Irish.

It is evident from the minutes of the planning meetings for Irish and for Irish activities that a review of the department’s work, the promotion of the Irish language and Irish culture at school level is taking place. This work is highly commendable. It is recommended that the Irish department has an input to the language action plan recommended above in terms of short, medium, and long-term targets.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The very high standard of the teachers’ short-term planning and preparation was a characteristic of all the classes observed during the inspection. Due to this complete planning, a developmental order and worthwhile pace was associated with the subject matter of the lessons and the PowerPoint slides and the work sheets added to the students’ participation in the learning activities. All teachers shared the learning objectives with the students orally or on the board at the commencement of classes, and also as the learning activity changed. The teachers undertook debriefing sessions with the students at appropriate points during the classes where the learners had opportunities to demonstrate or clarify what they had learned. This is a very good practice as it cultivates independence in the learners when they are required to identify their own learning outcomes. The teachers deserve praise for their diligence regarding short-term planning and preparation for their lessons.

There was a very good standard in the teaching and learning methods employed in all the lessons. In one class the students developed an understanding of a poem with the teacher’s guidance through the medium of questioning. The teacher provided a very good scaffold for the students’ learning by making comprehensive links between students’ prior knowledge and their new learning. In another poetry lesson, exemplary use was made of an integrated language skills approach to teaching a song and its background. The students’ attention was focussed on a target amount of text and a problem-solving approach was used where students in groups re-assembled the lines of the song in order. Variety was achieved in another lesson whereby a good balance between whole-class and group work was maintained. The teacher attended very well to the needs of the groups while they completed their collaborative tasks. It is recommended in relation to group work in this class, to agree the amount of time for the group task beforehand to ensure that the maximum opportunities for learning are achieved, in regard to the mixed-ability context, in particular. It is also recommended that an extended task be made available for those students who complete the core task before the allocated time expires.

All teachers had a very high standard of Irish, and sufficient opportunities were created at the various levels for the students to use their Irish during the lessons and in accordance with their proficiency range. The teachers’ high standard of language simplification skills greatly assisted this interaction. It is recommended to record the graded version to support the simplification provided orally. It would also be of value when tasks are being corrected during classes to provide a written record of the correct version of the answers. Each of these developments would help to strengthen the learner’s spelling ability, especially for those students whose visual learning is uppermost. The students’ attention was directed towards grammatical points in the communicative context of the text and not as individual atomistic items.

There was a mutually respectful diligent learning atmosphere in all the lessons observed during the inspection. Each teacher had very good classroom management skills. The teachers had a very good knowledge of the students in their care, and their understanding of the students’ learning needs was evident. This added much to the learning and teaching encounter. Encouraging affirmation was always given for the quality of effort and the opinions provided by the students.

There was an exemplary learning environment in the classroom which was used primarily for the teaching and learning of Irish. It was evident that the teachers had reflected on the content of charts and posters. Useful language idioms, posters, grammar charts, displays of various competitions winners, the students own work, and a notice-board containing notices regarding the many competitions and other Irish activities being held in the school. It is recommended that the
good work in the Irish plan regarding the students’ vocabulary needs to participate in the target language, be placed on charts on the classroom walls. A number of announcements were visible around the school as well. It is recommended that the diligence of the Irish staff and the goodwill of management be harnessed to ensure that more permanent Irish signage form part of the students’ language experience.

**Assessment**

The school uses good practices for formative and summative assessment. A range of assessment methods is being used in the classes to monitor the learning process and students’ progress. These included the daily correction of the students’ written work, grammar tests, spelling, and other aspects of the work on a regular basis. Monthly summative assessments of the students are carried out in first year, third year and in Leaving Certificate. Teachers maintain records of these tests, and a report based on these assessments is sent home every month. Effective formative assessment strategies were being used during the inspection: questioning at various levels, memory games, pair work, individual work, as well as good attention to the students’ needs when completing tasks. Students undertake summative tests on two occasions during the year, and a report based on these summative tests also issues to homes. It is commendable that the various language skills are taken into consideration in the formative tests and summative assessment. Candidates participated in the optional oral test as part of the junior certificate examination for the first time this year. It is recommended that parents or guardians be informed regarding the students’ achievement across all language skills.

Two parent or guardian teacher meetings are convened in first, third and leaving certificate year and one meeting for the remaining students in the school. This practice is commendable.

The school has developed a policy for homework and homework diaries. The homework diary scheme is being used by all the students. The class teacher manages the homework diaries every day together with a weekly signing by the parents or guardians. There was evidence of this system in the random sample of diaries observed during the inspection. There is an emphasis in the homework policy on writing, on learning and on research. It is recommended that this process be reviewed to include variety in the four major language skills for the teaching of languages. The Irish department has written procedures regarding the correction of homework within the framework of the whole-school policy. This practice is commendable.

The random sample of class diaries which were reviewed and in which homework was being recorded, indicated that homework was being assigned regularly, but quite frequently the task was recorded by the students in English. It is recommended that whole-school strategies be developed to motivate the students to increase the use of Irish when the homework task is being recorded. It is commendable that there was variety across all language skills in the Irish homework because it reinforces the student’s competence in all the skills in accordance with the department’s own aims and objectives.

It was evident from the sample of copybooks which were reviewed that a substantial amount of work had been carried out in line with the syllabus requirements. There was continuity and developmental work to be seen here also. Good correction techniques were in evidence for grammatical errors and spellings. The basis of errors was provided instead of recording the correct version for the student, an approach which provides an opportunity for the student to internalise the rule and the correct version. The use being made of developmental correction,
which provides clear guidelines on the strengths and weaknesses of the work, substantial pieces in particular, was limited. It is recommended that the department reviews this matter with a view to improving the students’ level of learning during the correction process. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website (www.ncca.ie) and the information on assessment for learning will be very useful for this project.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish enjoys a strong reputation in the school where Irish is the language of communication and administration of the school. The school had developed a policy for Irish where the school’s context, statutory obligations and the aims and objectives of the whole-school community for Irish are clearly laid out.
- Very favourable provision is being made for language in the school as well as very good support from management to attend ongoing professional training, and to participate in co-and extra-curricular activities.
- The department’s collaborative planning is of a high standard, and the department carries out a regular review of this developmental work.
- The teaching and learning methods in use in all lessons were of a very good standard.
- The school has developed comprehensive procedures for assessment, homework, and to maintain contact with parents or guardians on a regular basis.

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

- It is recommended that an action plan be devised based on the school’s policy for Irish and the aims of the Irish department. Quantifiable practical steps need to be set out to realise the implementation of the school’s vision for Irish among the whole-school community.
- The department should discuss developmental corrections with a view to improving the students’ learning from the correction process.

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

Published, February 2011