An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Glenamaddy Community School,
Glenamaddy,
County Galway.

Roll number: 91514U

Date of inspection: 11 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Glenamaddy Community School, Glenamaddy, 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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The provision in the timetable for the teaching and learning of Irish is satisfactory. Students in senior cycle have five class periods each week. It is commendable that four class periods are allocated for the teaching and learning of the language in Transition Year (TY) and five periods in junior cycle. It is recommended that every effort be made to timetable the five class periods in third year on different days for the coming year. Students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) have three weekly classes, and the learning support teacher provides in-class backup support during one of these classes. This good practice is lauded.

A common programme of work is being followed with first-year students from September to the November break when the students undertake a common examination. Classes are then streamed in accordance with the levels in the state examinations. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed, and an opportunity be provided to students to become accustomed to the new school context for a longer period of time. In view of the practice whereby the students undertake common examinations at the end of first year, it is recommended that decisions regarding the most suitable examination levels for the students be based on this examination together with the student’s attitude and effort throughout first-year. Two teachers teach the same class group in first year. It is clear from the plan that these teachers are not teaching in co-operation with each other and that separate programmes are laid out for this group. It is recommended that this be re-examined with a view to achieving the best possibilities for the students in terms of learning and continuity. All other class groups in the school are organised in accordance with the levels in the state examinations with the exception of Transition Year, which is arranged on the basis of mixed ability.

All teachers involved in the teaching and learning of Irish in all classes are graduates in Irish. The management is congratulated on this policy which is in place for the recruitment of the Irish staff. It is commendable that the majority of the teachers are teaching in both cycles and at the various examination levels, an approach which results in the majority of the department having the relevant experience to teach the subject from first year to Leaving Certificate. Management
makes every effort to ensure continuity by assigning the same teachers to remain with the students during a cycle. Every support and encouragement is given by management to the staff to participate in continuing professional development (CPD) courses. In recent years the school has organised many whole-school inservice days on general education themes. Staff representatives have attended an Irish inservice course organised by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). It is recommended that attendance at similar courses be continued, and as part of the school development planning (SDP) process, that information from these courses be shared with the entire department. It is commendable that the material provided at the SLSS courses is contained in the planning folder, a provision which ensures that the information will be a useful reference point when the team is preparing common plans for teaching and learning. Team members have experience of correcting written certificate examinations and conducting oral examinations, and it is worthwhile to share this valuable experience with all members of the department.

A wide range of information and communication technology (ICT) is available in the school. The management is heartily congratulated for conducting a survey of the necessary aids, which were needed by the various departments prior to going into the new school. As part of this prior planning, an analysis was conducted of the needs of teachers in order to integrate ICT in their classes. The management has definite plans for further development in this area on a whole-school basis and for the Irish department itself. The Irish teachers have their own base-rooms which contain additional teaching and learning resources. The teachers have easy access to televisions, compact disks, multi-function digital disks (DVDs) and overhead projectors. The Irish plan includes sources for additional resources. It is recommended that an incremental plan be developed which would augment the teaching and learning equipment for Irish. The lists of resources which are available to support teaching and learning at post-primary level on the SLSS website, and the website www.cogg.ie, are recommended as a reference point when the department is adding to the teaching and learning resources in the future.

A range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is provided for the students. Seachtain na Gaeilge is a major event on the school’s calendar. Gaeltacht scholarships are awarded to a number of students each year under the auspices of Roscommon Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Some year groups attend Irish drama productions. The students participate in Gael Linn debating competitions and quiz competitions. It is commendable that a distinction is awarded in every subject. It is recommended that the criteria for the distinction in Irish be made known to the students at the beginning of the school year.

In accordance with the provisions of Circular M10/94, eleven per cent of the total number of students have been granted an exemption from Irish by the school. It was reported that the majority of the exempted students had recognised learning difficulties, and that the remainder were students who did not receive their schooling within the jurisdiction.

Irish has a presence in the school environment. The classroom names are in Irish and bilingual notices are on display outside the school. The management is well disposed towards the development of Irish in the school. The school’s motto ‘Ar aghaidh linn le chéile’ is in Irish. The school has developed a good Irish policy for a number of years now. Praise is due to the management of the school for giving such priority to Irish at a whole-school level.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish department has been engaging with the SDP process since the year 2002. The teachers convene a meeting each term. A record of these meetings is retained in the Irish plan. A subject
co-ordinator has been appointed for the department and this appointment is rotated by agreement. This custom is commendable because there is continuity in terms of planning targets, and gradually this approach will ensure all the staff will have the leadership skills associated with the role of co-ordinator. The department and the management are congratulated for according such priority to planning for the language.

The school has a good Irish policy but the connection between this policy and the Irish department’s planning for the language is limited. This policy was reviewed in the year 2007, and it is now time to undertake another review in the context of the new school, and the changes therein in terms of the resources in particular. It is recommended that the scope of the policy be extended to raise awareness of the language at a whole-school level, and that the objectives of the Irish policy be stated in terms of the students’ learning outcomes in and about the language. This would provide a framework for the curricular planning in terms of the teaching and learning, and for the approach to evaluation. The Irish policy is available in English only, and it is recommended that the revised policy be made available in both languages. The Irish department has identified priorities for the current school year: to increase the levels of participation in the higher level certificate examinations. In order to provide guidance to language development in the school, it is recommended that an action plan be designed based on this priority, and other agreed priorities from the department and management. It is also recommended that the main recommendations included in this report form part of the action plan. A timeframe for the action plan should be decided as well as the nomination of representatives to achieve the targets. In view of the appointment this year of an officer for Irish and culture as part of a post of responsibility, it would be beneficial to define a definite role for this post which would add value to the work of the Irish department on a whole-school basis.

The department has developed curriculum plans for all year-groups with the exception of third year. It is recommended that this matter be reviewed. There are various practices in these plans. Included are lists of topics in first year, plans based on examination papers only in second year, and plans based mainly on the teaching of literature on a termly basis. It is commendable that the order in which literature is being taught is agreed between the ordinary and higher levels, and that there is emphasis on the formal and informal teaching of grammar. It is recommended that plans be designed to teach the language thematically across the language skills as recommended in the syllabuses, and in the Guidelines in support of Teaching the Revised Literature Course from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) available at www.slss/gaeilge. It would be desirable to include the teaching and learning activities which will be introduced, as well as the resources and the assessment methods. With a view to the commencement of this systemic common planning, some teachers can work on particular plans and submit them to the department to cultivate a steadfast approach to the teaching and learning of Irish as well as to the evaluation.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A good standard of short-term planning and preparation was carried out for the vast majority of classes observed during the course of the inspection. As an outcome of this good planning there was a structured order in these lessons, the vast majority of teachers shared the learning intentions with the students, and in some classes these were recorded. It is recommended, when the short-term planning is being undertaken, to differentiate the learning objectives to suit the range of abilities in each class. Some teachers used good practices: among them were the recording of the date in Irish, PowerPoint slides and authentic visual aids. Such support material adds much to the presentation as an alternative to a reliance on the text book as the main instrument of teaching and
learning. It would be of value to conduct a debriefing session with the students at the end of the lesson, to identify what has been achieved in terms of the learning, as this cultivates independence in the learners when they are required to identify their own learning outcomes.

The questioning method between teacher and students constituted the main method of teaching and learning during the inspection. In general, good use was made of this approach in the preparation and correction of homework in a cooperative manner, to teach a letter and a poem, and to correct a reading comprehension task. The teacher undertook very good pre-skill work on reading comprehension as preparatory work for homework with the help of key vocabulary on a PowerPoint slide. Good work was carried out on the target vocabulary in a variety of ways in preparation for a reading task. It is recommended that the students’ attention be focused on pronunciation as well as the meaning of vocabulary as pre-skill work for reading. The teacher connected the theme of the comprehension text with the students’ own experience, and appropriate time was given to students when questions were asked. Differentiated tasks were assigned in the homework suited to the students’ ability. These teaching and learning approaches are commended, and it is recommended that wider use is made of these good techniques. In some classes, repetition and drill, through the medium of questioning, were used to present the lesson material. As an alternative approach to teacher-student questioning, it is recommended that the students be organised in pairs according to ability or to facilitate peer learning. In this way, students will have an opportunity to work together on their receptive and productive learning skills.

The integrated approach was being used in two classes although it was not done thematically. The approach works better when aspects of the syllabus are synthesised thematically as recommended in the syllabuses. In one class, a comprehension and a tape excerpt from examination papers comprised the lesson material for ordinary level students, while foundation-level students were working independently on various tasks. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed, and a listening comprehension handout be prepared to suit foundation level students in accordance with their ability. This differentiated approach would increase the learning level of ordinary and foundation level students together. In the other class where tape material was used during the lesson, it is recommended that more definite objectives be in place for the listening exercise, in preference to listening with a view to becoming familiar with the length of the pieces. Such an approach would increase the number of learning outcomes by the end of the listening tasks.

In a small number of classes, the students were assigned individual tasks, and the teacher attended carefully to the needs of individual students as appropriate. The same circulating is recommended for listening comprehension in preference to remaining in a central location in charge of the compact disk. All teachers made good use of the textbook during lessons. Many teachers used the board or PowerPoint to correct homework answers, as pre-skill work for homework, to record new vocabulary, as a visual scaffold for oral work and to emphasise points of grammar. These practices are highly commended, and it is recommended that such techniques be used by all members of the department. As an outcome, the department would be catering better for those learners whose preferred learning style is visual. It is also recommended that listening comprehension responses be recorded on the board in order to strengthen the students’ spelling competency, as often additional marks are available for spelling in such exercises in the state examinations.

Two general recommendations are made about the teaching and learning methodologies. Firstly, in preference to teacher-student questioning comprising the main methodology, it is recommended that task-based approaches are employed to provide an opportunity for students to
be active in generating their own learning. In this way teacher-talk will be reduced and the students will have an opportunity to acquire more meaningful understanding from the lesson activities. It is recommended that the information from the SLSS courses, which comprise part of the plan, be a focal point for the commencement of this work.

There was variety in the teachers’ practices regarding the amount of the target language being used to teach Irish. Those teachers who used mainly Irish in their teaching are lauded. All members of the team are encouraged to reflect on the amount of English being used, so that the students’ competence in Irish can be well developed. In any Irish class, the language used in the classroom for making a request, or for highlighting a misunderstanding, should not be in English. The vocabulary used in the teaching of literature should also be very familiar to junior students, without mention of senior students. Those teachers who directed the students’ attention to points of grammar and dialect in the context of the text are commended. One teacher selected a point of grammar at the commencement of the lesson, and the point was further emphasised during the lesson, and again at the end of class. These approaches are commendable, in preference to teaching grammar in a formal manner for a specific time each week, as was observed in some copybooks from the random sample collected in the course of the inspection. This practice should be reviewed in accordance with the recommendations in the syllabuses regarding the formal teaching of syntax. Some teachers used good techniques for the teaching of new vocabulary, where the new word was associated with the root, which the students were familiar with already. This approach is highly commended, and more vocabulary-learning strategies should be taught explicitly to all students, those for whom language learning is not easy in particular.

ASSESSMENT

The school has developed a homework and study policy, and a homework diary system is being used by all the students. The class teacher manages the homework diaries each week and the parents or guardians of junior students sign the diaries each night. Management is commended for the amount of Irish contained in the permanent section of the diaries. The random sample of diaries which were reviewed indicated that there was regular recording of the homework in line with the whole-school policy. However, there was much emphasis on written work and on rote learning. It is recommended that variety across all the language skills be included in the task being assigned, as described in the introduction to the homework and study policy. Bilingual versions of the recording of the homework task were included in a small number of the diaries. The teachers who take the opportunity to use the recording of the homework as a source of teaching and learning are lauded, and wider use of such a practice is recommended.

The inspector reviewed copybooks and folders in all the classes during the course of the evaluation and a commendable amount of work was observed in them in accordance with the needs of the syllabuses. The amount of correction done on student errors, including substantial pieces of writing, was limited in a significant number of copybooks. In the remaining copybooks, good correction methods were being used which provided an explanation of the error made to the students. It is recommended that such an approach be used for all the learners of Irish. It is also recommended that the department discuss assessment for learning, and developmental feedback on the students’ work in particular. Additional information on assessment for learning is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment at www.ncca.ie.

The school has developed systematic approaches for summative evaluation, and a report based on these formal examinations is sent home. It is commendable that an oral examination forms part of
this evaluation, which is being conducted in senior cycle since the year 2006. It is recommended that methods be developed so that an oral examination also comprises part of the evaluation experience of junior students in the school. Common examinations, a commendable practice, are used in all year-groups. In addition to the summative evaluation, continuous evaluation of students’ progress is conducted. A certain percentage should be agreed for the students’ participation in the target language during the Irish classes, and that it be taken into consideration during continuous evaluation. Regular tests are administered to the students, and it is commendable that all language skills are included in these tests.

It is commendable that the management conducts an analysis of the results achieved by the students in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that the department itself compares these results with the national average marks on a yearly basis. It is also necessary to study the number of students who undertake the higher level in the certificate examinations in both cycles. In this way the department will be able to make plans to devise strategies, which would improve the participation rates and the levels of students’ achievement.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish has a good standing in the school and the management is empathetic to the language and the development of the language in the school.
- Favourable allocation has been afforded to Irish in the timetable and in the deployment of teachers.
- The school has extensive ICT facilities and resources.
- Good teaching and learning techniques were in use in the vast majority of classes, which encouraged the vast majority of students to participate in the lesson materials.
- Every effort is made to include all language skills in the students’ formative and summative assessment of students.

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

- A review of the whole-school policy for Irish is recommended in the context of the current circumstances of the school.
- It is recommended that the curriculum plans, which have been developed by the department for all year groups, be reviewed within the framework of the revised Irish policy. It would be beneficial to design an action plan to ensure the strategic development of Irish.
- It is recommended that the department would add to the methodologies in use for the teaching and learning of Irish to include: the integrated approach to be employed thematically, and active methods and a differentiated approach to be a central part of every methodology.

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.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management is pleased to receive this positive inspection report, which recognises the strengths of teaching and learning techniques in Irish in the school, and the extensive ICT facilities and resources available and used by the Irish Department. The Board notes the recognition of the very positive role of school management in the development of Irish as a language in the school.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

The Board of management is happy to report that the Irish Department will be reviewing its curriculum plans in the context of on-going subject policy review and development, to include strengthening further its teaching and learning techniques and methodologies. A further review of the Whole-School Policy for Irish will also be included in on-going whole-school subject policy development and review in the current year.