Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St. Cuan’s College,
Castleblakeney, Co. Galway

Roll number: 62930V

Date of inspection: 28 February, 2011
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Cuan’s College, Castleblakeney, Ballinasloe, Co. 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 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

One half of the teachers who are graduates in Irish deliver seventy per cent of the Irish classes in the school. This subject inspection was carried out when only qualified teachers were present. Therefore thirty per cent of Irish classes are being taught by teachers who do not hold the appropriate qualifications. It is essential that the management review the standard of provision for Irish and draw up a plan for the teaching and learning of Irish which will ensure that a qualified core team of teachers are teaching in both cycles and that the students experience continuity throughout the cycles.

The number of class periods allocated to the teaching and learning of Irish is satisfactory. This includes four single periods in junior cycle, two periods in Transition Year (TY) and five periods in senior cycle per week. It is recommended that every effort should be made to allocate one period per day to the teaching and learning of Irish in junior cycle. First-year and TY students are assigned to mixed ability classes and the remaining students are assigned to classes corresponding to the levels in the State examinations. These classes are timetabled concurrently, an arrangement which facilitates transfer between the various examination levels, as appropriate. The school effectively manages students transferring from one examination level to a more suitable one, provided that a signed letter to this effect is obtained from parents or guardians. Students are given every encouragement to continue to study at higher level for as long as possible in each cycle. These practices are praiseworthy.

It is calculated that seven per cent of students have been granted exemption from the study of Irish by the school, in accordance with the provisions of Circular 10/94. It was indicated that the vast majority of these are students with specific learning difficulties and the remainder are a small number of students who did not receive their early education in this State.

There are informal links between the Irish department and the learning support department in the school. It was apparent from a meeting with the teachers and from a perusal of the departmental
minutes that these contacts should be put on a more formal footing, so as to ensure that the teachers are aware of the appropriate strategies for meeting the identified needs of these students. The teachers of Irish have designated classrooms and have ready access to CD players and televisions and DVD’s are also available to them. There is one computer room in the school which may be accessed on request. Despite having internet connections installed in all general classrooms, these were not functioning satisfactorily at the time of the evaluation, nor did the department have easy access to computers or data projectors. The school recently received a grant from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and the school management intends installing broadband linkages, computers and data projectors in all classrooms by Easter of this year. The information and communications technology (ICT) needs of teachers have been analysed and training will be provided accordingly from September 2011.

The school has a library which is managed by the fifth-year students in collaboration with Youth Work Ireland. At present, it contains no collection of Irish books as a support for the teaching and learning of the language. It is recommended that this situation would be reviewed, in view of the importance of reading as indicated in the Irish department’s own plan for the language. Few references are made in the plan to the additional resources being used as supports for the teaching and learning of Irish, apart from some CDs and newspaper titles. The teachers did have resources stored in their own rooms. It is recommended that a central storage place should be established in the school for resources for Irish. When the department is adding to the teaching and learning resources in the future, it would be of benefit if the lists of resources available to second level students on the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish, and on the www.cogg.ie website, were to be used as points of reference. The management is agreeable to allocating an annual budget towards increasing the number of resources available to support the teaching and learning of the language.

Members of staff have attended SLSS in-service courses on Irish. It is recommended that staff should continue to attend such courses and to share information given at these courses with the whole department, as part of the whole-school planning process. It is further recommended that the support materials distributed at the SLSS courses should be kept in the planning file, so as to ensure that this information will constitute a useful point of reference when the team is engaged in collaborative planning for teaching and learning.

Co-curricular and extra-curricular events in Irish are highly regarded in St. Cuan’s College. A lunch-time Irish Club was set up this year. Seachtain na Gaeilge is an important occasion in the school calendar and a multiplicity of competitions are organised during that week. Teams from the school participate in the Gael Linn debating competition. This year, for the first time, the school entered the TG4 short film competition. The Irish department organises out-of-school visits to the theatre. The school competes in the local quiz organised by Conradh na Gaeilge. Some Irish is to be seen in the school environment. The teachers who enrich the students’ awareness of Irish are to be heartily congratulated.

**Planning and Preparation**

The school has participated on a formal basis in the whole-school planning process for a number of years. The teachers convene meetings at least once a term and minutes of the meetings have been kept since August 2010, as part of the Irish plan. It is recommended that a summary of these minutes be forwarded to management at the end of each school year, so as to keep them informed of the progress made by the department and difficulties to be overcome. Two of the teachers share the duties of co-ordinator. It is recommended that meetings and minutes be in the Irish language.
Good work has been done in respect to certain aspects of the plan for Irish. In the department’s objectives, particular emphasis placed on the four skills of language, on the communicative approach and on the speaking of Irish as a living language. This practice is praiseworthy. It is recommended that these same objectives should constitute the planning framework for teaching, learning and assessment of the language. Curricular plans have been laid out on a termly basis for the delivery of the curriculum to each year group. It is recommended that these plans should be further developed on a collaborative basis, so that the language functions and the topics are being taught in an integrated thematic manner, in keeping with the key principles of the syllabuses. Examples of this integrated planning are to be found in the Guidelines in Support of the Teaching of the Revised Course in Literature by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which may be accessed from the SLSS for Irish at www.slss/gaeilge.ie. While collaborative planning is being carried out, it is recommended that, the same course in literature should be agreed for the first term for those who transfer from higher level to ordinary level in respect of second-year and fifth-year students.

In regard to the TY plan, it is commendable that a different learning experience is being provided for this year’s students in the second and third terms in relation to the subject matter and methods of assessment. It is recommended that the same approach would be implemented in the first term of TY. It is also recommended that the headings recommended above for the curricular plans should be utilised as a guide while planning is in hand for the presentation of the curriculum during the current year. It would be of benefit to teaching and learning if the assessment and review instruments on the TY website, www.slss.ie/transitionyear, were to be translated into Irish. This initiative would enhance the level of assessment in the language and, as a result of the review, the students would make an input into the programme of study for Irish during TY.

It is recommended that an action plan would be drawn up, so as to ensure the strategic development of the department. The recommendations of this report and the department’s own priorities should constitute integral elements of this plan. It is essential also that a target time be agreed for the action plan, and that the staff members responsible for attaining the objectives be identified. It is recommended that the work of the department would be reviewed regularly and that the outcomes of these reviews would be recorded in the plan.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The short-term planning and the preparation for lessons during the evaluation were of good quality. As a result of this good planning, the lessons had an orderly structure. It is recommended, while the short-term preparation is being carried out, that the learning objectives should be differentiated in order to reflect the range of abilities in each class. Students would gain from being made aware of these objectives and if the number of learning objectives were matched to the length of the lessons. A feed-back session with the students at the end of class would be worthwhile, specifying what has been achieved from a learning point of view, and this also cultivates independence in the learners when they are required to identify their own learning outcomes.

Good teaching and learning methods were employed in all the classes evaluated. A very good balance was achieved between the teachers’ input and the students’ activities. There was also variety in the tasks to be completed in class by the students. Communicative opportunities were created for the students in two of the classes and these opportunities greatly enhanced the level of student participation in these classes. Very good use was made of paired work in these two classes. Among the most important qualities of this collaborative work were the following: the task was explained with the aid of examples; the participants were assigned clear roles; the
teacher made every effort to respond to the needs of each pair and a feedback session was provided after each individual learning item or at the conclusion of the paired task. These techniques are commendable as they improve the task structure and increase the amount of learning achieved during the paired work. By way of a general recommendation for paired work, it is suggested that a time limit, appropriate to the particular task, should be agreed with the students beforehand in order that they may derive the maximum benefit from the learning possibilities generated by the task and that the work proceeds at an appropriate pace.

In one class, the language skills were integrated by means of a theme, as is appropriate. Although the teacher created a scaffold for the students’ learning when engaged in writing and reading tasks, the teacher remained in charge of the CD during the aural comprehension. It is recommended that this practice would be reviewed and that every opportunity should be taken to respond to the needs of students when they are completing tasks. As a general recommendation to the Irish department when they are teaching skills, teachers should first carry out preliminary work on the text, so as to give the learners access to the meaning of a passage.

The classroom white board was used effectively in one lesson to record the responses of students to a paired task. As a result of this good practice, there was a written record of the target verbs of the lesson which acted as a visual scaffold and assisted the learners in consolidation work on the subject matter. In other classes, however, no use or only limited use was made of the board. This approach should be reviewed and a record should be compiled of vocabulary and of new points of grammar arising during lessons. A written record of the answers to written and aural exercises should also be provided.

A friendly supportive learning atmosphere was noted in all the classes. The teachers were very well acquainted with the students in their care, and high expectations for learning generally prevailed. The teachers were very effective at class management. A stimulating physical learning environment had been created in all the classrooms in which Irish was being taught during the evaluation. The vocabulary which students need in order to express themselves, to clarify misunderstandings and to give voice to opinions was displayed over the white board in one of the classrooms. In order that this good practice might be extended further, it is recommended that the specific vocabulary needed by students during lessons should be displayed on charts on the classroom walls and that these should be alternated on a regular basis. With the passage of time, each year group will gradually acquire a useful vocabulary store, year by year. Generally speaking, Irish was the language used in every classroom interaction between teachers and students. The teachers skilfully simplified the Irish being used, hereby avoiding overuse of the translation method. This approach is commendable. In those classes in which English was being used to explain vocabulary or tasks, it is recommended that teachers should be mindful as to the language being spoken and that complete English sentences should not be used in any Irish class. It is further recommended that care should be taken in relation to the accuracy of the Irish being used in class, as the teacher is frequently the only exemplar of pronunciation and of accurate language usage available to the learners.

ASSESSMENT

The students of this school undergo summative examinations four times a year and reports are posted home based on the outcomes of these examinations twice during the school year. Common examinations are administered to all students. This practice is commendable. It is also commendable that all the skills of language are included in the summative examinations undertaken by senior cycle students. It is recommended that the language skills should form part of the assessment experiences of all the students, as laid down in the plan for Irish. It is also
recommended that parents or guardians should be kept informed of student attainment across all language skills. A development such as this would indicate the importance of the skill of speaking and it would give further encouragement to the students to make use of the target language.

The inspector reviewed a random sample of students’ copybooks and folders. They contained a good deal of work relating to the requirements of the syllabuses and displayed a good level of development. It is praiseworthy also that organisational skills are being cultivated among the students and that work on the different aspects of the course is kept in separate copybooks or folders. All the copybooks were being monitored regularly but little use had been made of developmental corrections which give direction for learning, including substantial written passages. It is recommended that more extensive use should be made of assessment for learning by all Irish staff members, as provided for in the school’s homework policy. The website of the NCCA at www.ncca.ie should prove useful in this context. It was reported that corrections are used as a diagnostic instrument in respect of the most common errors made by year groups and that this analysis is utilised as the subject matter for classes. This is good practice and, in support of this technique, it is recommended that the more common errors should be recorded on a page and that this should be used to cultivate the capacity of self-evaluation or of peer evaluation among the students.

It was apparent from the students’ copybooks, folders, text books and examination papers, which were randomly collected, that the translation method was being used far too extensively as a teaching and learning methodology for the language. As a matter of priority for the department, it is strongly recommended that the use of English in the teaching of Irish should be debated and that strategies should be devised which would lead to an increase in the amount of Irish being used in the teaching and learning of the target language.

It is praiseworthy that management analyse and outline the results achieved by the students in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that the subject department should make comparisons annually between the outcomes of this analysis and national norms.

The school has developed a most comprehensive whole-school policy on homework. Detailed guidance has been set down in all subjects for all year groups, with the exception of Transition Year. It is recommended that this policy should form part of the Irish plan and that the practices of the department for each year group should be devised with a view to fulfilling the general aims of this policy. In this way, there will be a greater emphasis on the cultivation of the four language skills, rather than assigning priority to written work and to memorising by heart as was the case in the random sample of journals reviewed during the evaluation.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Co-curricular and extra-curricular events in Irish are held in high regard in St. Cuan’s college.
- Good work has been done in respect of particular aspects of the Irish plan, including curricular plans.
- The teaching and learning methods evaluated were of a good standard.
- The school has devised good practices for summative assessment and homework.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is essential that the management review the standard of provision for Irish and draw up a plan for the teaching and learning of Irish which will ensure a qualified core team of teaches in both cycles and that there is continuity for students throughout the cycles.
- It is recommended that the curricular plans would be further developed collaboratively so that the language functions and the topics are being taught in an integrated manner, in keeping with the key principles of the syllabuses. It is also recommended that an action plan would be drawn up so as to enrich the learning experience of students in respect of Irish and to ensure the strategic development of the department.
- It is recommended, as a matter of priority, that the department would discuss the use of English in the teaching of Irish, and would devise strategies which will increase the amount of Irish used in the teaching and learning of the target language.
- It is recommended that all the language skills should form part of the students’ homework experience and should be taken into account in the summative assessment of each student. It is also recommended that more extensive use should be made of assessment for learning among the entire Irish teaching team.

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

*Published, November 2011*