Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Iognáid,
Sea Road,
Galway City.

Roll number: 62970K

Date of inspection: 1 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 Coláiste Iognáid, 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

Irish has an important place in the tradition of Coláiste Iognáid and there was a time when all the teaching and learning was through Irish. From the seventies onwards there has been an Irish stream in each year of the junior cycle and all subjects are taught through the medium of Irish. Every effort is made to have the language central to all the events that are organised in the school.

Very satisfactory provision is made for the teaching and learning of Irish in the timetable. Junior classes and transition year (TY) classes are organised according to mixed ability. The students are streamed for Leaving Certificate according to state examinations levels and these classes are timetabled simultaneously. The management is commended for this provision.

The classrooms are student based. It was reported that there were good aids and resources for teaching and learning the language in the school with respect to televisions, compacts discs, digital versatile discs (DVDs), an overhead projector and a computer room being available on demand. Due to the fact that there is a great demand for these aids and resources in the school, it was evident from school documents that they are not always freely available to the Irish teachers. As there are ten teachers involved in the teaching and learning of Irish, it is recommended that the department itself has a television, digital versatile discs (DVDs), compact discs and an overhead projector. This should be possible, in that it was reported that the management gives generous support to the language, despite the fact that there is no formal budget for Irish. The Hewlett Packard award was bestowed on the school in March 2009, a mobile e-classroom with twenty two tablets, however the Irish teachers have not been trained to date. It is recommended that the department selects representatives from the Irish staff, who have ICT skills, to undergo training in the use of the new equipment and to share the skills with all department members on an incremental basis.

There is a library in the school but there is need to renew the collection of Irish books therein. Irish magazines and resources are kept in a press in the staffroom. It is recommended that a central storage place is developed in the library for Irish resources which would enhance the teaching and learning of Irish for both students and teachers.
All teachers who are involved in the teaching and learning of Irish to all classes are graduates of Irish. Management is congratulated on having this policy when recruiting Irish teaching staff members. It is commendable also that the vast majority of the teachers are teaching in the two cycles and at the various examination levels, an approach which ensures that the vast majority of department members have the appropriate experience of teaching from first year through to Leaving Certificate. Members of the Irish teaching team have experience of dealing with Irish colleges and with the certificate examinations, both written examinations and oral examinations. The management gives every encouragement and support to the staff to attend the in-service workshops of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. It is recommended that the representatives share the information from the in-service courses with the other staff members on a formal basis to ensure that all members are aware of the courses’ recommendations. A copy of such in-service workshops should be inserted into the Irish plan as a point of reference.

The amount of Irish on display on the walls of the classrooms and throughout the whole-school environment was limited. It is recommended as a priority for the department to increase the amount of Irish visible to students throughout the school. As all the staff who are teaching in the school have a strong fluency in Irish and the senior management is very well-disposed towards Irish, a whole-school project such as the above should be successful.

It is commendable that only two point four per cent of the school population have exemptions from Irish. The vast majority of these pupils have identified learning difficulties and one person has been educated outside the State. Every support is given to students with exemptions to participate in Irish language events. This provision is praiseworthy.

There is a strong tradition in the school of participating in a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular events that relate to the language. The students participate in music events, dance, quiz and drama competitions as well as Gael Linn debates. Connections have been fostered between the school and the Irish colleges and every encouragement is given to the students to attend such colleges. The staff is congratulated for its diligence in promoting the language both within and outside the classroom.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school has been engaged with the process of school development planning (SDP) on a formal basis since the year 2005. The Irish teachers meet three times in the school year. Records are maintained of these meetings and the minutes record the work of the department, as part of the school plan as appropriate. Management is kept informed about the progress in Irish as well as difficulties that have to be surmounted. As a support to the formal communication, the teachers meet regularly on an informal basis. Irish is the main language of communication between department members. A subject co-ordinator for the department has been appointed and this appointment is rotated by agreement. This practice is commendable, as there is continuity regarding planning targets and gradually this approach will ensure that all members of the staff will have the leadership skills associated with the role of the co-ordinator. The department and the management are congratulated on giving this priority to planning for the language.

A long-term framework has been developed for presenting the curriculum to all year groups, in which the topics to be covered have been set out on a termly basis. It is recommended that further collaborative planning is carried out on these long-term plans in order that the language functions and topics are taught in an integrated manner in accordance with the objectives set out by the
department itself and in line with the key principles of the syllabuses. It would be desirable to also include the teaching and learning activities, the resources and the assessment methods outlined already. There are examples of this integrated planning in the *Guidelines for Teaching the Revised Literature Course* by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2004) which is available from SLSS for Irish at www.slss/gaeilge. It was evident from an analysis of the curricular plans that various plans had been developed by teachers who were teaching classes at the same examination level and year group. It is recommended, however, that the department has a common plan for all year groups to correspond to the various examination levels.

It is recognised in the plan that there is some link between Irish and History. It is recommended that more planning is carried out to forge more worthwhile connections with other subjects which the students are studying. It would be very worthwhile to examine links with other languages. Such connections would provide an opportunity to discuss and exchange effective teaching methods among language teachers. This forum could be employed as a medium for fostering a whole-school learning experience for all languages, a development which would assist both teachers and learners.

The TY programme is provided on the basis of four modules. Different plans have been developed by the teachers for these four modules. There are efforts in all of them to provide a different experience for the students in line with the national aims of TY. This work is commendable, but it is evident that these plans were developed independently of one another, in terms of the amount of duplication in content contained therein. It is recommended that the planning for TY is carried out collaboratively as a department and that flexible arrangements are provided for in modules for individual teachers to teach an agreed aspect of the programme. It would be desirable to use the above recommended headings when this collaborative planning is being undertaken.

It is recommended that an action plan is designed to guide the strategic development of the department. The recommendations of this report and the priorities of the department itself should be an integral part of this plan. There is need also to set out time frames for the action plan and to nominate staff members to implement the targets. It was reported that meetings are organised to review the Irish plan. It is recommended that a record is kept of the results of this review in the plan.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very good standard of short-term planning characterised the majority of lessons observed during the course of the inspection. Due to the care taken by the teachers in respect to planning, a developmental structure and continuity was evident between lessons completed and future lessons. Clear learning objectives pertained to these lessons which gave good direction to the students. In certain cases the teachers shared the teaching and learning targets with the students orally or on the board. This practice is recommended to all members of the Irish team. It is also recommended that differentiated learning objectives are specified for learners which are adapted according to their abilities. This approach is also more successful when debriefing sessions are carried out with the students at the end of lessons during which the students have to identify their own learning outcomes. This fostering of independence in learners would also be compatible with the Jesuit pedagogy, as laid out in the school’s homework policy.
The majority of the teachers had done very good preparation work, with very good research in some of the notes which were prepared in advance for the classes and which greatly assisted the participation of the students in the lessons. In a small number of classes there was no evidence that short-term preparation had been carried out. The lesson content of one class was unsuitable for the ability of the students at that time in the cycle. A glossary was not provided with the worksheet and despite the fact that efforts were made to simplify the text or translate it into English, all students could not access the content of the lesson. There was no developmental work in these students’ copybooks, that incrementally equipped the students with the vocabulary to complete the task. It is strongly recommended that these practices are reviewed and that short-term planning is carried out within the long-term framework, in order to teach the course thematically and sequentially.

There was an enthusiastic and mutually respectful learning atmosphere in all the lessons which were observed during the inspection. The vast majority of teachers had very good classroom management skills. All the teachers knew the students in their care well and this greatly assisted the learning and teaching encounter. Affirmation was given at all times to the quality of the efforts and the ideas of the students who in general were happy to participate in the classes.

During the evaluation exemplary use was made of the integrated approach in almost half the classes. In these lessons the four language skills were intertwined thematically. The teachers employed excellent pre-skill work which enabled the students to complete the task across their range of ability. All the teachers in these classes attended very well to the individual needs of the students when they were engaged in individual tasks or pair work. It is recommended that, when tape excerpts form part of the lessons, the opportunity is grasped to tend to the individual needs of students, rather than continuing to operate the compact disc centrally. Accordingly, the teachers will have better insight into the strengths and the difficulties of the group with the aural comprehension task. All of these teachers made good use of oral-language pair work through very good pre-skill work and worksheets, which were in general of a high standard. For the purpose of further development of the pair work, two general recommendations are made. A suitable period of time should be agreed beforehand and an opportunity should be provided to allow for feedback from the greatest number of groups. The homework assignments evolved naturally from these lessons and involved reinforcement of the work of the lessons. The work of these teachers is strongly lauded. It is recommended that these exemplary methodologies are shared with all members of the department within the structures that are in the school for planning for the subject.

Some teachers made very good use of the brainstorming technique. In these lessons the teacher was gathering information from the students, recording their opinions and facilitating their learning. The students in these classes had a very good standard of Irish and there was a very high level of participation from all the students. These teachers are also strongly congratulated, as they set high learning expectations for their students with regard to accuracy and the extension of vocabulary in particular. It is recommended that, as an alternative approach to teacher-student activity, the students are put in pairs, according to ability or to facilitate peer learning. In this way, the students will have the opportunity to work together on their receptive and productive skills.

There were other lessons where the teaching and learning were dependent on teacher talk and the textbook. Although good preparation was done for two of these three classes, the students were not active in constructing their own learning. It is recommended that this is reviewed and planning is carried out to ensure that there is a balance between the input of the teacher and the activities of the students during every Irish class. In those classes where a reading comprehension
constituted the lesson content, the students read without pre-skill work being carried out on sounds or on vocabulary. As a result of this, all the learners did not understand the meaning of the passage and the students who were reading failed to produce the sounds. It is recommended that no new language skill is attempted before the appropriate pre-skill work is undertaken beforehand.

In general, good structured use was made of the board which aided teaching and learning and it is recommended that such applies to all Irish classes.

Irish was the main language of communication in all classes and the majority of lessons were conducted fully through the medium of Irish. The vast majority of teachers had very accurate oral and written Irish. Most of the teachers had good language grading skills. The teachers who practise this approach on an ongoing basis are commended as it avoids the overuse of the translation method. It is recommended that wider use is made of this approach rather than relying unduly on the mother tongue, as was the case with some class groups and also in evidence in some worksheets. In some classes the students were encouraged to make a connection between known vocabulary and new vocabulary and points of grammar and dialect were interwoven skilfully. These learning strategies are lauded.

ASSESSMENT

A comprehensive whole-school policy has been developed for homework which is informed by the Jesuit philosophy of education. The role of all partners, as well as directions regarding the type of homework and feedback, is laid out clearly.

The random sample of homework journals which were reviewed showed that homework assignments were recorded regularly. A good number of journals had records in Irish of homework for all the subjects and other journals were bilingual. This custom is praiseworthy. There was much emphasis on writing and on learning by rote in the homework assignments. It is recommended that all language skills be included in the homework tasks assigned. This approach would reinforce the competence of the student in all the skills rather than giving priority to one. There were two year groups in the senior cycle that did not have homework recorded regularly in the journals. It is recommended that this practice is reviewed in order to ensure that the students are making progress in line with the planned curriculum.

There was variation in the practices regarding correction procedures in the random sample of copybooks which were reviewed during the inspection. There was a series of copybooks which had mechanical corrections on syntactical mistakes and where the teachers used good approaches to give the students a clear understanding of the errors that were made. These teachers are congratulated on these techniques which aid student learning. It is recommended that these practices are used by all members of staff. A general recommendation is made that the staff makes use of formative corrections that give clear directions for learning to students. Further information on assessment for learning is available at www.ncca.ie. It was clear from a sample number of TY copybooks that a limited amount of work had been carried out since the beginning of the school year. There was no continuity pertaining to this work, in relation to theme or language function. Furthermore, there was no connection between this limited work and a programme of study that was outlined in the TY plan. It is strongly recommended that this is reviewed without delay. There were certain copybooks wherein teachers were using the translation method. It is recommended that these teachers review the amount of English used in the teaching and learning of the target language.
All students in the school undergo summative evaluation on two occasions. Every student does house examinations at Christmas, with Leaving Certificate students undergoing mock examinations at this time also. The mock examinations are corrected in the school. Mock examinations are organised for the junior certificate students in the spring. Students who are not doing State examinations have end of year examinations. It was reported that the four major language skills are included in these assessments. Two reports are sent home every year which are based on these results and additional reports are issued to homes if the work of the student is not satisfactory. This is commendable practice but it is recommended that reports are sent home on the satisfactory work of students also. The teachers discuss the competency of the students in the four major language skills at parent-teacher meetings but the attainment of the students in the skills are not specified in reports that are sent home. It is recommended that this is reviewed.

It is commendable that the management analyse and delineate the results which the students attain in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that the department itself compares this analysis with national average marks on an annual basis.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- There is a strong link between the school and Irish and the language has a strong standing in the school.
- A high standard pertained to the short-term planning and preparation carried out by the vast majority of the teachers.
- Methodologies for the teaching and learning of Irish were of a high standard in the vast majority of lessons.
- A comprehensive whole-school policy has been developed for homework and there are good systems in use to assess the progress of students.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- The tradition that exists between the school and the language should be more visible in the experience of the students who are attending the school at present.
- It is recommended that a full review be carried out of the availability to teachers and students of facilities and resources that enhance their experience of teaching and learning Irish.
- Agreed curricular plans should be developed by the department for every year group in the school. It would be beneficial to design an action plan to direct the strategic development of Irish in the school.
- It is recommended that the department discusses teaching and learning techniques so that the approaches, which were in use in the exemplary lessons observed, are part of the practice of all members of staff.
- It is recommended that use is made of formative corrections which give clear directions for learning to the students. It is recommended also that the competency of the students in the four major language skills is developed in the homework that is assigned and that this competency is communicated in the reports issuing to homes.

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