

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Christian Brothers Secondary School
New Ross, Co. Wexford
Roll Number: 63600F

Date of inspection: 23 September 2010



AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Christian Brothers Secondary School (CBS), New Ross. 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 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The number of students in Christian Brothers Secondary School, New Ross has increased in recent years and at the moment there are two class-groups entering first year. There is a higher-level class and an ordinary-level class in each year group to the Junior Certificate. The Transition Year (TY) is a mixed-ability class, an arrangement which accords with the philosophy of TY. There is a higher-level and an ordinary-level class in fifth year at the moment but the majority of the students in sixth year are undertaking ordinary level in Irish. It was reported that there is a good higher-level class in fifth year at present and the school management hope to significantly increase the number of students taking higher-level Irish in the future. It is recommended that this issue be a priority for the management and the Irish teachers.

There are four periods of Irish per week for first and second years. Based on a recommendation in an inspection report on Irish carried out in 2006, an additional period was provided for Irish in third year and there are now five periods a week provided for that year group. This provision is commended. Five periods per week are provided for fifth year and six periods for sixth year, which is a reasonably satisfactory provision. There are three periods available for Transition Year including one double period at the teachers' request. The availability of a double period is commendable as various activities can be more easily undertaken but this arrangement means that students only have contact with the language two days a week. School management are advised to investigate the possibilities of providing an additional period for Irish in Transition Year if possible.

Sixty nine students of the 238 students in total enrolled in the school have an exemption from Irish. Eleven exemptions are due to learning difficulties. Students born abroad, who had no understanding of Irish or of English on enrolment in school in Ireland, account for another fifty eight exemptions.

As recommended in the 2006 Irish inspection report, significant efforts are made in the school to raise the profile of the language and to extend the students' experience of Irish as a living language outside of the classroom. The management and teachers' efforts in this respect are commended. A series of activities are organised during Seachtain na Gaeilge and students are brought to productions of plays in Irish when such are staged locally. The management and Irish teachers are advised to develop this vitally important aspect of encouraging Irish in the school further and to organise a programme of interesting and attractive activities throughout

the whole year. Some recommendations were made on the day of the inspection concerning Irish-medium events which could be organised and a list of visitors who could be invited to speak to students. Extra-curricular and cross-curricular activities would underpin the teachers' work in the lessons as they add greatly to the students' understanding and experience of Irish as a living language.

It was reported that a number of students attend Irish courses in the summer. The school management are advised to speak to the parents at the relevant meetings about the advantages of spending a period at an Irish course in Irish in the Gaeltacht or in other areas. Information should be collected about courses which are available locally as well as those further from home and this information provided to parents. The parents should also be informed about the forthcoming changes in the state examinations system regarding additional emphasis on spoken Irish ability.

An annual budget is available for the Irish department. The teachers discuss their requirements among themselves and the request is then submitted to the principal. A data projector is available in each room at present and a laptop computer is to be purchased for each teacher. Broadband will be available in each classroom shortly and on the basis of these developments excellent information and communications technology (ICT) resources will be available for each teacher, which is highly commendable. It was reported that some of the Irish teachers attended the ICT courses provided by the Second Level Support Service for Irish last year and the teachers' diligence in this respect is commended.

The resources for Irish are available in a central location in the staffroom. It is recommended that a list be compiled of all the materials and resources available for teaching and learning Irish in the school and that this list be available as part of the plan for Irish.

Most classrooms are teacher based so some of the Irish teachers have their own classrooms. This arrangement offers the teachers a great opportunity to create a stimulating Irish-language environment in their classrooms. There was a certain amount of material on display in the classrooms visited dealing with the teaching and learning of the language. This could be greatly increased and more material placed on display which could be used during the Irish lessons.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish teachers meet as a group once a term to discuss specific issues relating to teaching and learning the language. Minutes of those meetings are available in Irish and they demonstrate that the issues most discussed at subject department meetings are the allocation of classes, textbook selection, in-service courses, the oral examination and new ideas for Transition Year.

A co-ordinator is nominated among the Irish teachers and it is intended to give each teacher the chance to assume the role from now on. This is good practice as it is important that all teachers be given the opportunity to lead the development of Irish in the school and the co-ordination of planning for teaching and learning.

A plan for teaching and learning Irish in CBS was provided on the day of inspection. The first part of the plan gives a precise account of the Irish department's aims, the organisation of the Irish classes, assessment of students, the use of resources and a list of in-service courses attended by the teachers. This part of the plan is clear and comprehensive and the teachers' work on it is commended. The second part of the plan covers the different teachers' work schemes and much work has been carried out on these. The work completed to date is highly commended. However, it is recommended that these work schemes be gradually further

developed, starting with first year, and that they would contain more precise information about the use of resources and teaching methods including strategies for oral development. It would be advisable also for the teachers to have a common approach and to use the same templates for the schemes of work.

A plan was provided also for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year. It is clear that concerted efforts have been made to widen the Transition Year Irish programme and to make it interesting and attractive for the students. This work is commended. It would be worth reviewing the Transition Year Irish programme on an annual basis, however, to ensure that the students are enjoying it and benefitting from it. It is recommended that the students' attention should be drawn to Irish as a contemporary language which is spoken in various places around the country, in the Gaeltacht and outside of it. It would be worth carrying out some research on the voluntary Irish language organisations in the country as well as the various state bodies dealing with the promotion of the language. This would give the students an insight into Irish as a living language.

Comprehensive planning had been carried out for all the classes observed. ICT material and worksheets were prepared for distribution to the students in all the classes visited. Individual teachers' plans were provided in certain cases and there was good work involved in these.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching was very good in all the classes observed and, apart from one instance where some translation was used, the use of translation from Irish to English was avoided completely. The commitment of the teachers to the use of the target language in the Irish classes, as recommended in the 2006 Irish inspection report, is commended. The students themselves made good attempts to answer and ask questions of the teachers in Irish and their efforts are commended also. The learning objectives were shared with the students in certain classes. This is good practice. It is recommended that this be done in all classes and that the lesson content to be covered in the class be written on the whiteboard so that students will have a better understanding of what the lesson objectives are and what is to be achieved.

There was good use of ICT during most of the classes observed and the teachers' work and preparation in this respect is highly commended. Various aspects of work were displayed using the data projector, including grammatical points, pictures, useful phrases, questions and answers and slides in the different classes visited. The use of additional resources in the class helps greatly to stimulate the students' interest in learning the language and to maintain that interest. Some other resources were used during the classes, for example memory cards and pictures. One class was observed, however, where no additional resources were used to add to the students' interest and to stimulate their imagination in the material in hand. It is strongly recommended that use be made of a wide range of resources in each Irish class. These resources should include ICT, pictures, photographs, music, film, DVDs, the Irish-language and English-language communications media and any other material the teachers feel is appropriate and which would add to the effectiveness of the teaching and to the students' interest in learning the language. The way in which the themes of two poems on the course were linked during the lesson in one case observed was commendable. In this case, however, the use of additional resources would have helped to stimulate the students' imagination regarding those poems' themes and images, and their use would have added greatly to the effectiveness of the lesson. It is recommended that these be used in future.

Opportunities for using the target language were provided for students, in a good number of the Irish classes observed, through the use of pair work and group work. This approach is highly commended. A recommendation was made in the 2006 Irish inspection report

concerning the creation of opportunities for the students to use the target language and the teachers are commended for their work in undertaking the implementation of that recommendation. It must be ensured, however, that these opportunities are available during all the Irish lessons and that the students have regular chances to use the language in a functional way apart from answering the teacher's questions. It is recommended that time be set aside to develop oral skills in each class.

There was a variety of activities to be observed in each class visited. Teachers made good attempts on the whole to develop all the language skills, using a thematic approach. This is commended as best practice. All the students observed participated in the lessons and there was continuous encouragement for the students' efforts. Discipline was very good in the classes visited.

The way in which complete sentences as opposed to single words were sought as answers to questions was very good. This practice is extremely important as it gives the students opportunities to practice their language skills and to compile simple accurate sentences in the target language. A couple of cases were observed also in which the students had to put new words, verbs and phrases into functional sentences on the spot to ensure that their meaning and correct usage in Irish was understood. This practice is highly commended. There was appropriate use of repetition also in certain classes, a practice which is commended as it is important to ensure that students can pronounce new words and phrases properly. It adds greatly to their self-confidence in the use and speaking of the language.

ASSESSMENT

The school organises in-school examinations at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent home to parents after these examinations. In addition, use is made of continuous assessment and the homework diary to keep parents and students informed of progress.

The students are streamed for Irish and for Mathematics in first year. The division of the students, between a higher-level class and an ordinary-level class, is based on the results of an assessment examination set for them in the month of February before they come to the school the following September. The school management is strongly advised to review this practice on the basis that the decision about student allocation to classes is made more than six months before they enter the school. It is recommended that mixed-ability classes be created for Irish in first year at least so that the students have the chance to develop their language skills. There are very few students attempting higher-level Irish in sixth year this year and a change of practice regarding early streaming should help to increase the number of students taking higher level in future.

The school took the optional oral examination in Irish in the Junior Certificate this year. At present, fifth and sixth-year students undergo mock oral examinations. It is recommended that this opportunity be provided for all the year groups from first year onwards. It is essential that the students and their parents understand the importance of speaking the language. It is recommended that the results of the oral examination in Irish in school examinations be included as a separate item in the reports sent home to parents.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The teachers' efforts to widen and develop the students' experience of Irish as a living language by organising activities during Seachtain na Gaeilge are commended.

- The work completed to date on planning for the teaching and learning of Irish is commended.
- There was comprehensive planning and thorough preparation for most of the Irish classes observed.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication was very good in all the classes visited.
- ICT was used productively in many of the classes observed.
- Good opportunities for use of the target language were created in many of the classes observed, as recommended in the 2006 inspection report.
- The manner in which oral skills are assessed in certain year groups in the school is commended.
- There was a good variety of activities during most of the classes observed which focussed on developing all the language skills.

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

- The school management and Irish teachers are advised to investigate ways to increase the number of students taking higher-level Irish for the state examinations.
- The number of Irish-medium events in the school should be increased by organising an extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme throughout the entire school year.
- Additional resources should be used to support teaching and learning in Irish lessons.
- All the students in the school should undergo oral examinations starting in first year.
- The streaming system for Irish in first year should be discontinued and students should not be divided between higher and ordinary-level classes until second year at the earliest.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the Irish teachers and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation at which 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 very pleased with the strengths identified in the Irish Department, particularly the planning and preparation of the classes and the use of the Irish language in the class.

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 welcomes the recommendations for further building on the strengths and development. These are currently being pursued.