Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Éamonn Rís
Wexford
Roll number: 63640R

Date of inspection: 11 October 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Éamonn Rís, Wexford. 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 the 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 to 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

Students are allocated to mixed-ability classes for Irish in first year in Coláiste Éamonn Rís. They are then divided into two higher-level classes and three mixed-ability classes at the start of second year, based on the results of the summer tests taken in first year. The number of higher-level classes drops to one in third year. The remaining classes are mixed-ability groups, and it is taken for granted that the majority of students in those classes will take ordinary-level Irish in the Junior Certificate examinations. Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school and there is one mixed-ability class at that level. There is one higher level and three ordinary-level classes in fifth-year and the same applies in sixth year. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish and the school management focus, as soon as possible, on bringing about a significant increase in the number of students taking higher-level Irish in the state examinations.

The provision for Irish on the school timetable is more than satisfactory, with five class-periods per week provided for every year-group, including Transition Year.

There are seven teachers responsible for the teaching of Irish in the school at present. Four of those are graduates in Irish and the other three teachers have studied Irish in the first year of their degree courses. Irish classes are allocated to teachers on the basis of continuity. It is recommended that the fully-qualified teachers get the opportunity of teaching all levels and age-groups.

Of the total school enrolment of 556 students, 55 have exemptions from the study of Irish. 26 of the exemptions are held by students who have learning difficulties and the remaining 29 by students who came from abroad. A very small number of students who have exemptions from Irish are actually studying the language and they are given great support in their efforts. This approach is commended.

Praiseworthy efforts are made in the school to broaden and develop students’ experience of Irish as a living language by organising events during Seachtain na Gaeilge, for example a treasure...
hunt, table quizzes, a poster competition and gaelic games. Events are organised for senior pupils, to be run during Irish classes in the course of that week. The school takes part in a table quiz organised locally by Feachtas, an organisation for Irish language youth clubs. An effort is also made to make a ‘Gaeltacht room’ available for the students once a week, where they can meet informally to speak Irish. It was reported that attendance varies radically according to the time of year. It is recommended that the teachers consider the possibilities of opening the room to one age-group at a time. It is possible that this might encourage more students to attend regularly. The teachers’ efforts to provide an extra-curricular and co-curricular programme for the students during Seachtain na Gaeilge are commended. It is recommended, however, that they build on that work and focus on providing an interesting attractive programme for the whole school-year. Some suggestions and ideas were offered to the teachers during the evaluation, concerning occasions and events that might be organised.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teachers of Irish meet as a group once a term. The minutes of the department of Irish indicate that the following were the main topics discussed at the meetings over the past few years: textbooks, common tests, Seachtain na Gaeilge, the Irish Room, scholarships and planning in general.

One of the teachers is nominated as co-ordinator of planning for the teaching and learning of Irish: this responsibility will be rotated among the teachers from now on. This practice is highly commended because it ensures that every teacher gets a chance of taking a leadership role in co-ordinating planning for Irish and in promoting the language in the school in general. It is recommended that the co-ordinator should undertake this responsibility for a two-year period, to ensure continuity.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was made available on the day of the evaluation. The plan includes general information on the department of Irish, for example, the layout of the classes, the timetable and the allocation of students to the different classes. Schemes of work for the different year-groups and levels were also made available as part of the plan. The work completed to date on the plan is commended, as is the layout of the plan. It is recommended, however, that more details be provided for the various year-groups and that the amount of information given in the schemes of work be gradually augmented. For example, it is suggested that in the subject-matter in the column headed ‘Class Work’, a distinction be made between methodologies and resources to be used in class. Reference should also be made to the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as an aid to teaching and learning the language. It is also recommended that a common template be used for the schemes of work for all year groups.

A plan was also made available on the day of the evaluation for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year. The work done to date on this plan is commended. The plan seems interesting and attractive, but it lacks specific information on the progression of the work from month to month. It is recommended that a more comprehensive plan be made available, indicating precisely how much work the students will undertake and the interactive teaching methodologies that will be used to provide opportunities for them to speak the target language.

Careful planning had been done for the classes observed. Notes and work-sheets were distributed to the students during the lessons.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication was reasonably good in the classes observed. In a significant number of cases, however, translation from Irish to English was used unnecessarily to ensure that students understood the content of the lesson. In other cases teachers did their best to avoid the use of translation and used a range of other strategies to ensure that the students understood the work in hand. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish agree a policy on the use of the target language in classes in general and that reference be made in that policy to the use of translation. Students may have very few opportunities of hearing the language and it is absolutely necessary that they hear it during their Irish lessons. It was evident during the evaluation that teachers of Irish themselves had problems with accuracy of language and many mistakes were made during the lessons. The most effective and important resource in any language class is the teacher’s own competence and in that context it is recommended that the teachers of Irish tackle this problem as a matter of urgency. This issue was discussed and some advice and ideas were given to teachers during the evaluation.

Good strategies were used during some of the lessons observed, to encourage the students to speak the target language in class. Pair work and games were among these strategies and this approach is commended. Teachers should ensure, however, that in carrying out activities undertaken in class, students must communicate with one another in the target language. In general it was felt, however, that students did not get enough opportunities to speak Irish during lessons. It is recommended that pair work, group-work, role-play and language games be regularly used during Irish lessons.

The way a poem was taught during one lesson observed was praiseworthy: another poem with similar themes was read to the students for the purposes of comparison. It is good practice to make links between elements of literature on the Irish or English curriculum. It helps to contextualise the themes of poems, various characters and abstract concepts for the students. Very few resources were used during lessons apart from the textbook and some worksheets. It is recommended that the teachers use a far broader range of materials and resources in Irish lessons, to make the subject-matter interesting and relevant for the students and to put the literature course in a contemporary context for them. It is recommended that films, television programmes, music, photographs, posters, podcasts and ICT be used to stimulate and foster students’ interest in the subject-matter of the lesson.

Teachers circulated around the classrooms, talking to students, correcting their work and ensuring that they were accomplishing tasks set. Students were continually praised for efforts made in class and, in general, discipline was good. A variety of activities was undertaken in the majority of classes observed and this good practice is commended. It is important to use a variety of tasks and activities in the lessons, to hold the students’ interest.

Effective use was made of the whiteboard to illustrate new vocabulary and answers to some questions. It is recommended that dictionaries be made available in the classrooms and that the students are shown how to use the website www.focal.ie when the school’s ICT resources improve.

ASSESSMENT

House exams are organised in the school twice a year, at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent to the parents after these exams. Contact is also maintained with parents following class-
tests set before the two mid-term breaks, as well as through the homework diary and parent-teacher meetings. Common Irish examinations are set as appropriate, a commendable approach.

‘Mock’ oral exams are organised for fifth year and sixth-year students and Transition-Year students take the exam for the Fáinné. The teachers’ efforts in organising the assessment of these students are commended, but it is necessary to assess the communication skills of all students in Irish. It is recommended that a start be made on oral exams for every year-group from first year onwards and that the results of the oral test be presented as a distinct item in each report sent to parents. It is also recommended that all the parents in the school community be formally made aware of imminent changes in the state exams in Irish and of the extra emphasis that will be placed on communicative skills in the language.

It was reported that a number of students go to the Gaeltacht every year, but no specific number was available on the day of the evaluation. Four partial scholarships are awarded to students in the school every year and that is a great support for the language in the school. It is recommended that students and their parents be made aware of the advantages that students derive from spending some time on an Irish course during the summer. It is suggested that information be made available about courses available in the region and about others farther from home, in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere.

It was evident from the copybooks examined that Irish homework is regularly set. There was a variety of practice in use, however, regarding correction of copybooks. Some of the copybooks were carefully corrected, with comments referring to the merits of the work and in some cases a mark or grade. In other copybooks examined, however, the standard was not very satisfactory, in so far as grammar mistakes had not been carefully corrected. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish agree a correction scheme which would provide feedback to the students on the standard of their work and which would help them to learn from their mistakes.

The number of students taking the higher level in the state exams is lower than one would expect. The ordinary-level results in the state exams in recent years indicate that more students could take the higher level in Irish. However, these numbers improved last year and it is recommended that an effort be made to foster that pattern.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The provision for Irish on the school timetable is more than satisfactory.
- The teachers’ efforts to extend the students’ experience of Irish as a living language beyond the classroom is commended.
- The amount of work completed to date on planning for the teaching and learning of Irish is commended.
- Good efforts were made in the majority of the classes observed, to use Irish as the language of classroom management, of teaching and of interaction.
- A variety of activities was undertaken in the majority of the classes observed and accordingly the lessons moved at a good pace.
- The teachers’ efforts in organising common exams for the various year-groups and levels as appropriate are commended.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the programme of Irish language events be developed and that an extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme be devised that would run through the whole school-year.
- It is recommended that the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish be developed, to include further information on methodologies and aids to be used, laying particular emphasis on the use of ICT.
- Teachers of Irish should pay particular attention to their own accuracy in spoken Irish in particular.
- It is recommended that a wider range of materials and resources be used in teaching the language.
- All students in the school should take formal oral exams from first year onwards.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation, meetings 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 welcomes the comprehensive review of the quality of learning and teaching of Irish in Coláiste Éamonn Rís. The many positive findings in the report were noted and the Board will endeavour to build on these strengths. It will also put an implementation plan in place for the recommendations in the report.

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

Since the inspection twelve months ago much has happened to enhance the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. A sub-committee has been set up as part of the school development planning process for the promotion of the Irish language in the school. The school’s ICT facilities have been greatly enhanced and three teachers have attended in-service on ICT and the teaching of Irish. Oral exams have been introduced for all year groups. The numbers opting for Higher Level at Junior Certificate level continues to grow. Two of the teachers attended summer courses in the Gaeltacht. The Board intends to put supports in place to facilitate the further upskilling of the Irish teachers in the school. Gaeltacht scholarships will be offered to a number of students in the 2011-12 school year.