An Roinn Oideachais and Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish

REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Grogan’s Road, Wexford
Roll Number: 63661C

Date of inspection: 28 April 2009
REPORT ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

THIS SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School, 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 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 to 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

This school has mixed-ability classes in first year. The students are then divided in second year between higher-level and ordinary-level classes based on the results of the first year examination results and taking the students’ and parents’ wishes into account. In second and third year there are three higher-level classes and two ordinary-level classes. Sometimes, the students are placed in mixed-ability classes again for Transition Year (TY) but this decision depends on the teachers and on the standard of Irish of the students in any particular cohort. There are two higher-level classes and three ordinary-level classes in fifth and sixth year. Every effort is made to encourage the students to remain with the higher level according to their ability and the teachers’ efforts in this regard are commended.

The provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory with four periods available for the classes in first year and five periods available for second and third years. There are three periods for Transition Year. The school management are advised to investigate this provision for TY to see if another period per week could provided on the basis that it is extremely difficult to provide a comprehensive and interesting programme over three periods a week. There are six periods available for fifth and sixth year students, which is very satisfactory provision.

Sixty one students from a total enrolment of six hundred and seventy seven students in the school have an exemption from studying Irish. Learning difficulties account for twenty nine exemptions, students raised abroad until the age of eleven years account for nineteen exemptions and the remaining thirteen exemptions have been given to foreign students. These students up to the Junior Certificate are exposed to Irish language and culture by getting the opportunity to participate in any extra-curricular activities planned within the Irish department.

Good efforts are made in the school to give the students some experience of Irish as a living language via the provision of an attractive extra-curricular and co-curricular programme. Seachtain na Gaeilge is celebrated by organising poster competitions, a quiz, debates and a céilí for the students. In addition to this, students are brought to productions by an Irish-language puppet and drama company, when they are performed locally. Particular note is made of the conversation circle which is held once a week for one of the classes in the sixth year. The organisation of the conversation circle is highly commended but it is recommended that efforts be made to extend it to the other classes in that year group. It is further
recommended that teachers continue to review and develop the extra-curricular and co-
curricular programme so that a series of events are organised throughout the year.

It was reported that a certain number of students go to the Gaeltacht each year but there were
no definite figures available during the inspection. It is recommended that the Irish teachers
and school management remind students and their parents of the advantages associated with
attending an Irish course in the summer. This greatly helps the students’ self-confidence as
regards developing the spoken language. It is recommended that parents be informed about
Irish-language and Gaeltacht courses available in the county and further from home.

An annual budget is available for the purchase of resources for the teaching and learning of
Irish. It was reported that the teachers discuss what is to be purchased. A list of current
materials and resources available in the school for teaching the language is part of the plan for
Irish. It is recommended that the teachers continue sourcing resources to support the teaching
of the language in the school. The websites of an Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus
Gaelscolaíochta and the Second Level Support Service for Irish should be monitored regularly
to access all the available resources. The teachers do not have their own base classrooms
which means that it is difficult to create an Irish-language environment in the classrooms.
Despite this, there was a certain amount of material on display in some rooms, for example in
one case observed some high quality projects based on aspects of literature were hung on the
walls and this approach is highly commended. The teachers are advised to display material in
the school environment in general to raise the profile of the language as much as possible.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

One of the Irish teachers is nominated to be the subject co-ordinator for the year. For the most
part, this role relates mainly to organising meetings of the Irish teachers. The teachers are
advised to discuss the co-ordinator’s role to see if the role could encompass wider
responsibilities regarding promotion and planning for the subject.

The teachers meet as a group once a month. Minutes of these meetings were provided in Irish
for the most part. These meetings dealt with arrangements for Seachtain na Gaeilge,
budgetary matters and arrangements for the oral examination, among other issues.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was provided during the inspection. There was
some material at the start of the plan in English which had come from the School
Development Planning Initiative. It is recommended that Irish versions of this material be
sought from the Initiative. The plan for Irish was divided according to the various year groups
and details were given of topics to be covered, aural comprehension lists, lists of poems and
short stories to be covered by certain classes. Information was also provided regarding the
division of classes, resources for teaching the language available in the school, information
from Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge and Foras na Gaeilge and a list of additional activities in
the school to support Irish. The teachers’ work on the plan to date is commended. The plan
could benefit from some development, however. It is recommended that the plan should
include an introduction giving an account of the layout and work of the Irish department,
information about the layout of classes, topics to be covered with the various levels and year
groups. The plan should also contain an account of the methodologies, communications
strategies and assessment methods as well as details of the materials and resources to be used
with various classes. It was not clear from the planning documents that much consideration
had been given to the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the Irish
classes in general. Planning for the use of ICT in the classroom should form an integral part of
the plan for teaching the language.

The work programme set out for Transition Year appeared interesting and attractive. It is
recommended, however, that the plan be available in Irish as well as English and that it
contain more specific information about what exactly will happen at different times during the year. It should contain more definite information about poems, other pieces of literature, details of Irish-language films and programmes which form part of the programme during the year.

It was clear that very comprehensive planning and preparation had been undertaken for all the classes observed. In certain cases, individual teachers’ plans, which were very comprehensive, were provided during the inspection.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was very good use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication in the vast majority of the classes observed. There was one case, however, in which too much English was used on a continuous basis during the lesson. It is recommended that the teachers agree a common policy regarding the use of the target language and that this policy form part of the plan for teaching and learning the language in the school.

Successful attempts were made in some classes to provide opportunities for the students to speak Irish in order to increase their ability to speak and use the language. This approach is highly commended but it should be extended to all the Irish classes. Pair work, group work and a game were used to encourage the students to speak in Irish in a couple of cases observed and it is good practice to use such measures. The teachers are advised to discuss a range of strategies among themselves to encourage the students to speak in the classes and these methodologies should be detailed as part of the plan for the language in the school. It is essential that the students have the opportunity to speak Irish each day in the classroom.

A very effective lesson was observed which was based around teaching a poem from the literature course. Poetry techniques were discussed with the students, connections were made between various aspects of the literature course to demonstrate similarities between characters and stories to the students, and the teaching and learning was very effective. The students were given the opportunity to discuss aspects of the poem in pairs and report back to the teacher on their opinions. The students clearly enjoyed the lesson and benefitted from it and great emphasis was placed on the use of the target language and this was completely accepted. In a couple of other cases observed, a short Irish-language film was shown to the students. Considerable efforts were made to get the students to think about the film’s subject and themes and the teachers had a very effective approach to encouraging students to reflect and debate. It would have been better in one case, however, if the teacher had prepared questions to distribute to the students after watching the film. They could have been given the chance to work in pairs and then to report back to the class on their opinions of the film. The use of the films to encourage the students to think and to use the target language is highly commended.

Apart from the two short films shown there were few other resources used during the Irish lessons apart from worksheets and the textbook. When copying worksheets from textbooks and other sources, the teachers are advised to ensure that the content is legible, modern and of interest to the students. Outdated material should not be used. Teachers are advised to use a range of resources and materials in the Irish classes including music, photographs, posters, magazines and authentic texts. The Irish-language communications media are a very valuable resource and it is recommended that they be used regularly. Podcasts can be downloaded from Raidió na Gaeltachta and used in the class, for example, instead of always using the aural comprehensions based on the State examinations. It is extremely important to use material and resources from contemporary life to make the learning of Irish more relevant and interesting for students.

The classes were laid out effectively with a range of activities planned for each class period. This is a good practice as it gives the students a chance to practise all the language skills –
comprehension, listening, speaking and writing. A couple of games were used during certain lessons and it was obvious that some recommendations from the in-service courses for Irish teachers, organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish, were being implemented, which is commendable. It was reported that all the teachers were given the opportunity to attend the various courses within the past two years and the school management is commended for this support. The teachers are advised to have a wider discussion of the content and recommendations of those courses in order to gain more benefit from attending them.

There was a good continuity in the classes between work done before the inspection and work being done in the classes observed. One class was observed containing students who were not very competent in the language and a very effective lesson was taught. Productive use was made of the white board and excellent preparation was made for the class and for the activities, which meant that the students had no difficulty in following the lesson in its entirety.

The teachers conducted the observed classes energetically and diligently. They circulated around the classroom while students were working on written tasks or on pair work, encouraging them, correcting them and ensuring that the work was being completed in general. The students worked diligently and there was clearly a good atmosphere in the classes. Repetition was used in some classes to ensure that students were able to pronounce phrases and new words correctly and this is a good practice as it helps to develop the students’ self-confidence.

**ASSESSMENT**

In-house examinations are organised in the school at Christmas and in the summer. It was reported that common examinations are organised in first, second and third year for the different levels. The teachers’ work in organising these examinations is commended.

It was reported that some teachers set oral examinations for the students in certain classes but there is no definite policy or system, although the point was made during the inspection that there is always a great emphasis on speaking the language in class. It is extremely important that each class in each year group undergo oral examinations from first year onwards. Students must be reminded from the outset of the importance of this aspect of learning the language. It is recommended that the marks from the oral examinations be shown as separate units in the students’ end of year results.

There was considerable work to be seen in the copybooks observed. It was clear that homework is assigned and corrected on a regular basis. There was a variety of practice, however, in the correction of the homework. In certain cases a grade or mark was given for the work done, in other cases comments were given on the completed work and in other instances although the work was corrected carefully there was no grade, mark or reference to the quality of the work. The Irish teachers are advised to agree a common approach in relation to this and whichever system is chosen to ensure that the students are given feedback on the work they have done.

The number of students taking examination papers at higher level in the state examinations for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate is extremely satisfactory and the attainment in the examinations at each level is good.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
• Good efforts are made in the school to provide an extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme of Irish-language activities for students.
• The work completed to date on planning for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school is commended.
• It was clear that very comprehensive planning and preparation was done for all the classes observed.
• There was very good use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication in the classes observed.
• The students were given plenty of opportunities for communication in Irish in some classes observed and this approach is commended.
• Some examples of best practice in teaching were observed in the classes inspected including an extremely effective lesson on Irish literature and the use of short Irish-language films in a couple of classes.
• A high number of students take the higher-level papers in the state Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations and the attainment at each level in Irish is very good.

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 activities be extended gradually to give the students additional opportunities to experience Irish as a living language. It is also recommended that access to the conversation circle be extended to other classes in that year group, especially for higher-level students or those who are interested in speaking Irish.
• It is recommended that the current plan for the teaching and learning of Irish be developed and that more details be entered regarding teaching methods, the use of resources, the use of ICT and the Transition Year programme.
• It is recommended that a wider range of resources be used in all the classes and that opportunities to speak Irish regularly be extended to all classes.
• It is recommended that each class undergo a formal oral examination from first year onwards.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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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