An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St. Gerard’s College
Castlebar
County Mayo

Roll number: 64580H

Date of inspection: 27 November 2009
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Gerard’s College, Castlebar, County Mayo as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 and deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Good provision is made for the teaching and learning of Irish in the various programmes. There are four single periods in the junior cycle, three periods in Transition Year (TY) and six single periods in senior cycle per week. The number of class groups in the various year groups in terms of the average number of students in each group, in first year and in TY in particular is satisfactory. First-year and transition-year students are allocated to classes on the basis of mixed ability. Students are streamed at the end of first year and all other year groups are organised in accordance with the state examination levels. Classes in these year groups are timetabled concurrently. This student-centred provision is commended because it affords students the opportunity to select the class which best suits their needs. The school manages well those students who wish to move from one level to a more suitable level by requesting a note of authorisation from parents or guardians together with the advice of the subject teacher and management. These arrangements are commendable. It is customary for the teachers in the department to give every encouragement to the students to follow courses at the higher level for as long as possible during the cycle in accordance with their ability and wishes. The management makes every effort to ensure continuity by allocating the same teachers to the students for the duration of cycles.

All teachers of Irish in mainstream classes are graduates of the subject. It is commendable that the vast majority of teachers are teaching both cycles and at the various examination levels, an approach which ensures that the majority of the department have the appropriate experience to teach the subject from first year through to Leaving Certificate. Staff members are experienced in the correction of certificate examinations and as assistant examiners for the oral examinations. The Irish teaching team are members of Comhar na Máinteoirí Gaeilge and they are also affiliated to other local Irish agencies. The management gives every encouragement and support to the staff to participate in continuing professional development. Full school days have been devoted to general educational themes during recent years, and representatives from the Irish department have attended Second Level Support Service (SLSS) inservice workshops on Irish. The attendance of Irish teachers at SLSS courses since 2007 is commendable. The school practice
whereby the representatives share information from inservice courses with other members of staff on an informal basis, is also commendable. It is recommended that the feedback session from SSLS inservice days should be organised on a formal basis to ensure that all members of the Irish teaching team are made aware of recommendations made at inservice courses. A copy of the inservice workshops should be included as a reference point in the Irish plan. The management is congratulated for its clear support for Irish, and the teachers are lauded for their diligence in the fulfilment of their duties.

The Irish teachers have their own base rooms with generous access to televisions, compact disks, DVDs and overhead and data projectors which support the teaching and learning of language. There are two computer rooms as well as ICT aids and broadband in many of the general classrooms. It was reported that the management made every effort to provide a laptop computer to every teacher who indicated a need for one. The school’s ICT team and management are congratulated for the incremental development of the ICT provision during recent years. The school also has a language laboratory which is used in a limited manner by the Irish department. It is recommended that this be reviewed. There is no annual budget for Irish, and the references in the plan for Irish regarding additional resources are limited, with the exception of the names of textbooks being used in support of the learning and teaching of Irish. The teachers store resources in their own classrooms. It is recommended that a central storage area for Irish resources be developed in the school. It would be beneficial to have as a reference point the lists of resources available for post-primary students on the website of the SLSS and also available at www.cogg.ie when the department is augmenting its resources for teaching and learning in the future.

A total of nine point five per cent of the school’s population have an exemption from Irish. The vast majority of exempted students received their earlier education outside the jurisdiction of the State.

The language has a presence in the school environment; signs and notices in Irish as well as the names on the various rooms in the school are on display. The teachers are congratulated for their diligence in promoting Irish culture within and outside the school through the provision of a range of extra and co-curricular activities for the students. Seachtain na Gaeilge is a major event in the school’s calendar. Students from some of the year groups attend drama productions in Irish. It is a tradition of the school to participate in the Gael Linn debating competition. The school hosts the regional Feachtas quiz competition and has achieved many distinctions in this competition at regional and national level.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school commenced the school development planning process on a formal basis in the year 2006, and the Irish department meets once per term. Minutes of meetings are kept in the Irish plan as appropriate. In support of the formal contact, the teachers also meet regularly on an informal basis. There is no coordinator of the department, and the department’s work is shared equitably. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed and a coordinator be appointed from the members of the department to ensure that there is continuity in terms of the development of the department’s planning objectives. The role could rotate on an agreed basis. Gradually, the leadership skills associated with the role of coordinator will be developed by all staff members. When this structure is fully established, it is recommended that an action plan be designed to guide the department’s strategic development. The recommendations of this report and the department’s own priorities should form a central element of this plan. A time frame for the action plan should also be identified as well as the nomination of staff members for the
implementation of the objectives. It was reported that meetings are organised to review the plan. It is recommended that the department’s work be reviewed on a regular basis and a record is kept of the outcomes of this review in the plan.

Good work has been done on some sections of the plan. In the department’s aims and objectives, special emphasis has been directed towards the development of Irish as a living language in the school environment. Priority has been given to extending the students’ writing ability and the cultivation of a positive attitude towards spoken Irish. With a view to developing this good work, it is recommended that the department’s objectives be framed in terms of student learning outcomes which would provide a framework for planning, teaching, learning and assessment.

Curricular plans have been developed on a termly basis for the different year groups. The best planning was evident in the junior plans which detailed the teaching themes, the aspect of the course, type of homework and assessment methods. The senior plans were very general. The details provided in both cycles in terms of available resources were limited with the exception of the textbook names, compact disks and additional handouts. It is recommended that the headings which are being used in the junior planning be used as a template, and the learning aims and methodologies should also be detailed. When resources for the department have been developed as recommended above, the department could list the resources for teaching and learning the themes. In this way, planning will have been done to teach the language thematically and in an integrated manner across the various aspects of the syllabuses in accordance with the approach recommended in the Irish syllabuses. Such an approach provides better supports to the students in acquiring the language because of the inter-dependent mutually reinforcing relationship that exists between the skills. It is also recommended that more collaborative planning takes place to ensure the same programme is being taught during the first term in second and fifth year for those students who transfer from the higher to the ordinary level.

A programme has been devised for Transition Year. However little effort has been made to provide a different and innovative experience in the teaching and learning of language during this year. It is recommended that the plan be reviewed and that additional teaching and learning aims be formulated in accordance with the national objectives for TY as recommended by the Department in Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools or at www.slss.ie/transitionyear. In this way a framework will be designed to provide a different learning experience for this year’s students in terms of content, methodologies and assessment methods. It is also recommended that the headings for the curricular plans recommended above be used as a guideline when planning the presentation of the curriculum during this year. It would assist the teaching and learning to translate to Irish the assessment and review instruments on the TY website. This development would augment the level of language assessment and, through the review process, afford students the opportunity to input into the Irish study programme during TY.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A high standard of short-term planning was a feature of the vast majority of lessons observed during the inspection. These lessons were structured and well paced. High and clear learning outcomes characterised lessons, which the teachers shared with the students at the commencement of lessons and again when undertaking recapitulation or a new element of the lesson. These practices are commendable. When undertaking short-term planning, it is recommended that learning outcomes be differentiated in order to provide support for students for whom language learning is not easy, and to provide a challenge to more able students. In one
class a summary of what had been achieved in terms of learning outcomes was carried out. This approach is commended as it cultivates learner independence, and it is recommended that wider use be made of this teaching and learning technique. It is also commendable that homework tasks arose naturally from the material of all lessons, and in general very good preparatory work was carried out for the homework tasks as appropriate. The preparation carried out by all teachers for their lessons was of a high standard. This included worksheets, a television clip of a game, the lesson framework on the board, a tape segment, target vocabulary from a reading comprehension and transparencies with answers for homework tasks. The teachers are commended for their diligence in providing teaching and learning aids. It was reported that such resources are shared among the teachers. This co-operative work is commendable.

Very good teaching and learning techniques were used in the vast majority of lessons during the course of the inspection. The integrated approach was being used in half of the classes and good variety characterised these lessons. The integrated approach succeeds better where the lesson is focussed on a single theme, as was the case in one exemplary lesson. A clip from a Gaelic football game was used as an initial stimulus for a conversation between the teacher and students on sporting matters arising from the students’ local experience. The theme was further consolidated by using a poem about Gaelic football. A variety of questions was used to evaluate the students’ basic understanding and appreciation of the poem. It is recommended, that the vocabulary of the poem be explained before the commencement of the questioning session in order to enhance the number of students who would be satisfied to voice opinions about the poem. The students worked individually for a pre-arranged length of time to plan a letter on the same theme. The teacher attended well to the students needs and they were reminded about the available time for task completion. A feedback session followed the individual task during which students offered one point from their personal plan of their own letters. It is recommended that these points be recorded to affirm the students’ work.

Different aspects of the syllabus were also integrated in other lessons although this synthesis was not done thematically. In consequence, there was no consolidation of the same vocabulary across the different skills and aspects of the courses. Very good preparatory work was undertaken on prose questions, a tape and reading comprehension but no pre-skill work was undertaken on the vocabulary of the written or oral texts. As a result, all the students were not able to complete all tasks. It is recommended that this be reviewed and that pre-skill work be undertaken for every language skill so that all the students can work across their range of ability in order to complete the task. It is also recommended that stopping the tape and translating text on a word-for-word basis be avoided because it is not necessary that students understand every word, and such an expectation for students undermines their confidence.

In another lesson a brainstorming session was conducted with the students on the vocabulary of the target theme. Key vocabulary was consolidated by recording the vocabulary on the board into two categories. The students were then given an opportunity to focus on the language in a more active manner using an oral memory game which was dependant on the use of the target vocabulary. In the game, the students willingly accepted scaffolding from the teacher and very positive feedback was given on the students’ efforts. This good practice is lauded.

In other classes teacher questioning of student comprised the main teaching and learning method. In a reading comprehension lesson the teacher facilitated the students’ learning, and guided the students through the reading comprehension text from examination papers through the medium of questioning. The students interpreted the meaning of the text in a collaborative way. The vocabulary of the text was simplified in an exemplary manner, and the students were encouraged to explain difficult words to their colleagues in simpler Irish. In another class where an individual
task was given to the students, they were well able to complete the task as a result of the pre-skill work already done by the teacher and students together. This practice is highly commended as is the number of learning possibilities achieved during the course of these two lessons. Also commendable is the excellent work done in the explicit teaching of learning strategies, in the use of the titles of poems and literary themes in particular. It is recommended that the teaching of learning strategies in an explicit manner be extended to all team members. Such approaches cultivate deep learning in all students, especially in those students who have a limited number of learning strategies.

In general the teachers used the board and transparencies effectively to present the lesson structure, to record new vocabulary and responses, and to clearly record the homework. It is recommended that the board be used to record words which are encountered in lessons to consolidate the oral spelling of words. The board can also be used to link new words with a word already known, an approach which was being used orally to link examples such as te and teocht, lá and lae. Such recording would also visually emphasise grammatical points, an approach which would assist those learners whose preferred learning style is visual in particular.

All the teachers are deserving of high praise for the comprehensive practices being used by them in the use of the target language. All teachers had very good ability in grading their language as well as cultivating a similar skill in students. Frequently during lessons there was evidence that students were able to simplify a word or language idiom or provide a synonym of the vocabulary of the text. These approaches work much better than an over-reliance on the translation method, which was being used in a number of the textbooks and copybooks of some class groups. All teachers had very accurate Irish and they focussed the students’ attention on grammatical points in the context of the text. The teachers deserve much praise for setting high expectations for their students. Grammar was being taught as a standalone item in a small number of classes and in a number of copybooks. It is recommended that long lessons in grammar and the tedium associated with this approach be avoided, and that it preferable to return repeatedly to the target grammatical points in the context of the various aspects of the course. The students had a good level of Irish and were willing to participate in the majority of classes. The students were competent in the vocabulary necessary to express themselves, to highlight a misunderstanding and to give an opinion as appropriate for the different year groups. The teachers are congratulated for all their work in terms of motivating students in the acquisition of the target language.

There was a mutually respectful, diligent learning atmosphere in all the lessons observed during the inspection. All of the teachers managed their classes well. The teachers had a good knowledge of the students in their care, and this greatly helped the interaction for learning and teaching. High standards of learning and behaviour were set in the vast majority of classes, and affirming feedback was always given for the high quality of effort and opinions offered by the students. Praise is also due to the teachers for the efforts made in cultivating stimulating environments in the classrooms in which Irish is being taught. Grammar charts, posters, diagrams, students’ own stories, prizes, pictures, certificates, vocabulary and classroom rules, maps, language rights and lists of useful websites were on display.

**ASSESSMENT**

Summative assessments for first, second and fifth-year students occur twice yearly. Certificate examination students undertake summative tests at Christmas and trial examinations in the Spring. A report based on these summative tests is sent home. It was reported in a document which was made available to the inspector that common assessments are not used. It is
recommended that the department discusses the advantages of providing common examinations for students. Since it was not clear if the various language skills were included in these summative assessments, it is recommended that such be carried out and that parents or guardians be kept informed about the achievement of their children across all the language skills.

A range of formative assessment methods is used in the classes to monitor the learning process and the students’ progress. These include continuous assessment, the correction of students’ homework on a daily basis, tests at the conclusion of every unit as well as end-of-term tests. Effective formative strategies were in use during the inspection. There was oral questioning at different levels, memory games, paired work, individual work as well as good attention to the needs of students when undertaking tasks.

The school has developed a homework and a study policy, and a homework diary is being used by all students. On a weekly basis the class teacher examines the homework diaries which are also signed regularly by the parents or guardians. Regular recording of homework was taking place in some classes, however there were class groups where this was not occurring. It is recommended that the importance of the diary be further emphasised in all class groups. The random sample of diaries examined and in which a record was being kept, indicated that the homework was being given regularly. There was much emphasis, however, on writing and rote learning. It is recommended that variety across all the language skills be included in the assigned task in order to consolidate the student’s progress in all skills in preference to prioritising just one skill. This level of variety would be in keeping with the whole-school policy on homework and study. In a small number of diaries a bilingual version of the homework task was in evidence. The teachers who avail of the opportunity to use the recording of the homework as a source of teaching and learning are commended, and it is recommended that extended use be made of this practice.

It was clear from the sample of copybooks examined that a good range of work had been done in line with the requirements of the syllabuses. There was continuity as well as developmental work observed. Good correction had been done on grammatical errors and misspellings. The root of the error was recorded for the student in preference to merely recording the correct word, an approach which provides an opportunity for the student to reflect on the rule and the correct format. Limited use was made of developmental corrections which provide clear guidance on the strengths and weaknesses of the work, in particular in substantial pieces. It is recommended that the department reviews this practice in the interest of improving the students’ level of learning from the correction process. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie and the information it contains on assessment for learning will be very helpful for this project. It was reported that corrections were being used as a diagnostic assessment tool regarding the most common errors being made by year groups, and that this analysis was being used as lesson material. This practice is very commendable and extended use by all members of the department is recommended.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- **Good provision is made for the teaching and learning of Irish in the various programmes, and the language has a visible presence in the school environment.**
- **There was a high standard of short-term planning in the vast majority of lessons, and in the short-term preparation being used by all teachers.**
• Effective teaching and learning methods were used in all classes, and there were exemplary techniques in some classes observed during the inspection.
• Systematic practices are being used for 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 recommended that the resources for teaching and learning Irish be developed, and a central storage area be provided for them.
• It is recommended that the department’s objectives be stated in terms of student learning outcomes and that these provide the framework for planning, for teaching and learning, and for assessment in all the programmes. It is also recommended that curricular plans be developed for each year group. It would be beneficial to elect a coordinator from the department’s members in order to ensure the department’s strategic development.
• When undertaking short-term planning, it is recommended that differentiated learning outcomes are outlined in order to provide support to student for whom language learning is not easy and to provide a challenge to more able students.
• It is recommended that recognition be given to all language skills in homework assigned, in assessments and in reports issuing to homes.

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

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