An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Scoil Aireagail
Ballyhale, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70570N

Date of inspection: 29 April 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Aireagail, Ballyhale, carried out 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 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 the subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

First year consists of mixed-ability classes in Scoil Aireagail. Generally there are two classes in each year group. The students are divided in second year into a higher-level class and an ordinary-level class, based on the results of the end-of-year summer examination in first year. Third year also consists of a higher-level class and an ordinary-level class. Students are allocated to mixed-ability classes in Transition Year (TY). At present, there are three classes in fifth year, a higher-level class and two ordinary-level classes. This year there is one higher-level class and one ordinary-level class in sixth year. It was indicated that there is good flexibility in the school as regards students changing from one level to another, as is appropriate.

Junior-cycle students have four periods of Irish per week. Some of these periods are of thirty-five minutes duration. This level of provision is not entirely satisfactory and it is recommended that school management examine the possibilities of allocating a fifth period over one if not two years in the junior cycle. Transition Year classes have only one period of Irish per week. The level of provision for Transition Year classes must be significantly increased. It is recommended that TY classes would be allocated between three and four periods per week for Irish. The timetabled provision for Irish in fifth year and sixth year classes is very satisfactory, amounting to six periods per week.

There are three teachers of Irish in the school. All of them have long years of experience of teaching the subject. They rotate classes among themselves, under the direction of the school management, in order to ensure that each teacher is given the opportunity of teaching the various levels and age groups.

Sixty-five students, out of a whole-school total of three hundred and seventy-three students, have an exemption from the study of Irish.

Creditable efforts are made to celebrate Seachtain na Gaeilge in the school, with a view to giving the students some experience of Irish as a living language. During that week, a poetry
competition, a quiz, a poster competition and different games are organised in the classes. The teachers are complimented on their endeavours in relation to this extra-curricular and co-curricular work. However, it is recommended that the programme of events for Seachtain na Gaeilge continue to be developed and that an attempt be made also to implement a programme of Irish events throughout the school year.

A small number of students visit the Gaeltacht each year. Some of these students were to be heard during one lesson in particular and their spoken Irish had clearly benefited from their periods spent on an Irish course in the Gaeltacht. It is recommended that school management should broach the question of Irish summer courses with parents and bring the benefits accruing from them to their attention. They should inform them of the courses available locally and of Irish courses in the various Gaeltacht areas. A Gaeltacht scholarship scheme, funded by the Vocational Education Committee, is on offer in the school, and it was reported that this is continually in demand. This scholarship scheme is commended.

There is a box of materials and resources available to the teachers of Irish in the teachers’ workroom. It was indicated that funding is allocated for additional resources, if requested. This year for example, the teachers of Irish were supplied with CD-players. It was also reported that there is limited access to the computer room and to rooms in which television programmes may be viewed. It is recommended that management explore the feasibility of setting a number of rooms aside for language teaching in general, and that the appropriate equipment would be installed in them over a period of time. While teachers would not have access to one of these rooms for all classes every day, they should be given regular opportunities to use them and to show films and clips from the internet. In addition, it is recommended that the teachers compile a list of the materials and resources available for the teaching of Irish in the school and this should constitute a central element in the plan for the teaching of the language. Teachers should also be constantly accessing new materials and teaching and learning resources which could be used with the students, as well as sourcing other materials from contemporary life.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A meeting of the teachers of Irish is held at least once a term and more frequently if there is a specific matter to be discussed. Minutes are kept of these meetings. Among the matters discussed at these meetings are book lists, the allocation of students to classes, arrangements for Seachtain na Gaeilge and planning for the subject in general.

One of the teachers of Irish is nominated as co-ordinator of planning for the subject every second year or so. This is a good practice as it gives every teacher an opportunity to play a leadership role in relation to developing the subject and to progressing planning for Irish in the school in general.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was made available on the day of the evaluation. It is apparent that very creditable work has been done by the teachers on this plan and their work is commended. Particular praise is due for the consideration which the teachers have given to the challenges they face as teachers of Irish and to their plans for the future. The plan describes the aims and objectives of the school’s Irish department. Information is also given in relation to allocation of students to classes, timetabling, resources and methodologies. An outline is then given of a work plan for each year group, comprising simply of a list of topics to be covered during the year. It is recommended that the plan should be expanded substantially and that it should include details regarding a range of methodologies, communication strategies, resources to be used with students and assessment methods, together with the topics to be covered with the
year groups and the various levels. There should also be a focus on planning for the use of information and communications technology (ICT) with the different classes, as the availability of ICT equipment in the school improves.

A more complete and more wide-ranging work programme should also be drawn up for Transition Year students. TY gives teachers a wonderful opportunity to enable students to experience Irish as a living language. It is recommended that an interesting, stimulating, enjoyable programme be created for students during that year. It is also essential that more than one period per week only would be timetabled for Transition Year. It was reported that teachers intend to take the Transition Year students on a week-end trip to a Gaeltacht area next year and this development is warmly commended.

It was evident that comprehensive, detailed planning had been carried out for all the classes observed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The use of Irish as the language of management, of teaching and of communication in the classes observed was very good. The teachers are complimented on their diligence regarding the use of the target language. Teachers also made considerable efforts to avoid the use of translation from Irish to English. A range of strategies was utilised in order to avoid translation including the use of the white board and mime. This approach is very praiseworthy but use could also have been made of the posters displayed in the classrooms in order to further elucidate matters for students.

On the whole, students were well behaved and courteous in the classes observed. The teachers succeeded in getting most of the students to work and the discipline was good. In a number of instances, teachers required that students would answer questions in the target language with complete sentences, in preference to single words, and this approach is commended. This practice should be extended to all classes. It is important that students would be given a further opportunity of becoming familiar with the syntax and accurate use of Irish language.

In certain classes students were given some opportunities for communication through Irish. Paired work was introduced in one instance observed and in a number of instances open questions were put to students on issues relating to their lives and range of interests. This approach is highly commended. The manner in which games were played in a number of classes observed is also commended. It was felt that the use of activities in class was in keeping with the recommendations of the Second Level Support Service for Irish and the teachers’ diligence is commended as regards implementing the recommendations of the in-service courses in class. It is important, particularly in the case of junior cycle students, that their interest in and regard for Irish would be stimulated, in order that they would enjoy learning the language. It was felt, however, that additional opportunities for communication in Irish could have been created in the classes in general. Answers to questions are not sufficient on their own as opportunities for speaking the language. It is recommended that the teachers would create structured opportunities for communication, based on paired work, group work and role play, having regard to the ability levels of the students. It will then be possible to progress on to unstructured communication, if the class is of a sufficiently high standard to benefit from it.

One lesson was observed where the students spoke Irish very well. Every effort was made to encourage them to speak in Irish, which they did with enthusiasm. Commendable efforts were made to ask them challenging questions, so as to get them to think, and to seek well-thought-out answers from them. The work undertaken during the lesson is commended, particularly the work
associated with completing the *Foinse* crossword which was quite challenging in places. The students had done homework on a particular topic and this work was of a very good standard. While the students spoke Irish very confidently, both their written Irish and spoken Irish were very prone to errors. In other classes, students also had some difficulties with the structure and syntax of Irish. An examination of the copybooks revealed also that students were careless in accurately noting down work from the white board. It is necessary to constantly remind the students that they must be conscious of errors and specifically of the correct use of tenses in relation to verbs. It is important that this issue would be properly emphasised, especially with higher-level students. It is essential also that copybooks be reviewed regularly, in order not only to examine the homework but also to get an overview of the work as a whole and to assess the progress in general. It is recommended that the teachers would discuss among themselves an agreed approach to improving accuracy. The teaching of grammar was integrated into some of the lessons observed, and this is a sound practice.

While students made very creditable efforts in many classes to answer the teachers’ questions through Irish, and teachers themselves were asked questions from time to time, it was clear that many students experienced difficulty with Irish as the language of classroom management. It is recommended that teachers would teach a series of sentences, questions and phrases, such as “What is the meaning of …?” and “How do you say …?” in order that students would be better enabled to communicate with the teacher through Irish in class. Posters showing these questions could be displayed in the classrooms in order to assist students, or they could be written into their school journals.

Effective use was made of the white board in the classes observed in order to highlight new vocabulary, to illustrate parts of the body and to record questions and answers in some instances. Apart from the white board, very few other resources were utilised in the classrooms. While it is accepted that a difficulty exists as regards the use of the television outside of the school’s main classrooms, it is strongly recommended that use would be made of a more extensive range of resources, including music, photographs, pictures, games and film clips in those rooms in which it is possible to show them. The use of resources from contemporary life helps to contextualise the lesson content for students which is an essential element in stimulating and developing students’ interest in learning.

**ASSESSMENT**

In-house examinations are held twice a year, at Christmas and in summer. Reports are sent home to parents, following these examinations. In addition, some continuous assessment is carried out by teachers in the various classes.

It was indicated that it is intended to introduce oral examinations in Irish for all the classes in the school from next year onwards. This initiative is highly commended, as it is so important to place a proper emphasis on the spoken aspect of the language, from first year onwards. It is essential that the importance of being able to speak a language is brought to the attention of both parents and students, particularly in view of the changes made to the state examinations. Levels of attainment in oral examinations should be indicated in the reports sent to parents.

First year students follow a common programme and all classes sit the same end-of-year examination in summer. This is a good practice and the teachers’ work in respect of it is commended.
While the school management is commended for the provision of a higher-level class in each year group in the school, it is necessary to bring about a gradual increase in the number of students who choose the higher-level papers in the state examinations. It is also necessary to enhance the attainments of students, particularly in the case of students who undertake work at the higher level. The use of a wider range of resources and materials in the classes, a greater emphasis on accuracy and an increase in the number of opportunities for communication through Irish for students, should help to bring about an improvement in the levels of attainment in general.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for Irish on the school timetable for fifth year and sixth year, amounting to six periods per week each, is very satisfactory.
- The endeavours of teachers in respect of celebrating *Seachtain na Gaeilge* in the school are commended.
- The school’s Gaeltacht scholarship scheme, and the plan to take the Transition Year students on a weekend trip to a Gaeltacht area are commended as initiatives to help promote Irish in the school.
- The work completed by the Irish teachers on planning for the teaching of Irish in the school is commended.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, of communication and of teaching was very good in the classes observed.
- The opportunities for communication, created through group work, unstructured communication and games in some of the classes observed, are laudable.
- Careful planning had been carried out for all the lessons observed.
- The plan to administer an Irish oral examination to all students in every year group next year is 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 school management would again examine the timetable provision for Irish in junior cycle and Transition Year, with a view to increasing the number of allocated periods for next year.
- It is recommended that the list of the resources available for the teaching of the language in the school should be registered and that the supply of materials and resources should gradually be increased. Furthermore, it is recommended that regular use would be made of these resources during Irish classes.
- It is recommended that the school management would explore the feasibility of setting a number of classrooms aside for the teaching of languages in general, so that material relating to teaching languages could be made available in them, as well as new technology equipment.
- It is recommended that the plan for the teaching of Irish in the school would be developed so as to include comprehensive planning for the use of ICT and more wide ranging planning for Transition Year.
- It is recommended that more opportunities for communication in Irish would be provided in the Irish classes in general and that communicative phrases appropriate to the Irish class would be taught to the students from first year onwards.
• It is essential that teachers and management would address the issue of increasing the number of students who opt for higher-level in Irish in the state examinations and also the issue of improving the attainments of students, particularly at the higher level.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish 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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