Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Scoil Chonglais
Baltinglass
County Wicklow
Roll Number: 70750P

Date of inspection: 21 October 2010
REPORT ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Irish. 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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

There are mixed-ability classes for Irish in first year in Scoil Chonglais. The students are divided into two higher-level classes and one ordinary-level class at the beginning of second year, based on the results of the first-year summer examinations. The number of students taking higher level falls in third year and there is one higher-level class and two ordinary-level classes in that year. Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school and as a result there is one mixed-ability class in that year, an arrangement which is in keeping with the Transition Year philosophy. There are two ordinary-level classes in fifth and sixth year, with one higher-level class in both year groups.

There are four periods of Irish per week allocated to the classes in the junior cycle. The school management are advised to investigate the possibilities of providing an additional period for one of the year groups in the junior cycle at least. The provision for Irish on the school timetable for senior cycle is very satisfactory with four periods for Transition Year and six periods for fifth and sixth year.

There are three teachers teaching Irish in the school. They are all graduates in Irish and they have years of experience in teaching the language. The various classes and levels are rotated among the Irish teachers, under the direction of school management. It is good practice that the teachers should have the opportunity to teach all ages and levels of ability.

Thirty three students out of the total of four hundred and sixteen students in the school have an exemption from Irish. Twenty seven exemptions are due to learning difficulties and six exemptions are held by students who came from abroad. Efforts are made to encourage students with exemptions to learn Irish if possible and they are given the opportunity to participate in the Irish classes during Transition Year.

Good efforts are made in the school to broaden and encourage the students’ experience of Irish as a living language. Seachtain na Gaeilge is celebrated by organising competitions as well as arranging games and showing short Irish-language films. In addition to this a Club Gaeilge is organised every Friday at lunchtime throughout the year. TY students take the Fáinne examination and they are presented with the Fáinne on Transition Year awards night. The Irish teachers’ efforts in organising additional extracurricular and cross-curricular
activities for the students are commended. It is recommended that the work being done at present be further expanded and that a programme of interesting and stimulating activities be set out for the year to encourage and maintain the students’ interest in learning the language. Some recommendations were given during the inspection visit regarding interesting events which could be organised. Irish language and cultural activities underpin the teachers’ work in the classrooms.

It was reported that a certain number of students go to the Gaeltacht each year but there was no definite figure available on the day of inspection. The school management and Irish teachers are advised to inform parents about the changes to be made in the state Irish examinations and the additional emphasis on speaking the language. It is recommended that parents be informed about the advantages of spending a period on an Irish course, in the Gaeltacht or outside of it. Parents need to be informed about courses available locally and those further from home and in the Gaeltacht. Three scholarships are provided for students of the school, two from the VEC and one from the Parents’ Committee. These scholarships are valuable additional resources for the school.

Money is available for the Irish teachers to purchase materials and resources for teaching the language by submitting a request to the principal on an individual or departmental basis. There is a reasonable supply of resources for teaching Irish in the school and the teachers keep these in their own rooms. It would be advisable to have those resources in a central location so that all the teachers could access them easily. The teachers are advised to do ongoing research on the most modern and up-to-date resources for teaching Irish on websites such as www.cogg.ie and www.muinteoirgaeilge.ie.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish teachers meet as a group twice a term and more often if necessary. Minutes are kept of these meetings, some in English and others in Irish. The minutes indicate that the main issues discussed at these meetings are: book lists, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Gaeltacht scholarships, a literature workshop, common examinations and the allocation of students to classes.

One of the Irish teachers is nominated as the co-ordinator of planning for teaching and learning the language in the school. This responsibility is rotated among the teachers and this arrangement is commended. It is good practice that each teacher should get the opportunity to take a lead role in co-ordinating planning for teaching and learning and the promotion of Irish in the school in general.

A plan was presented for the teaching and learning of Irish during the inspection. This plan covers the school’s and Irish department’s mission statement, general aims and objectives, the allocation and organisation of classes and other organisational aspects of the Irish department. Class plans were provided also and their organisation was commended. However, it is recommended that more details be provided concerning the use of resources, including ICT, the use of a range of methodologies and information on assessment strategies.

A plan was provided also for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year. The diversity of that plan is commended as well as the effort made to provide an interesting and attractive programme for students throughout the year. Some substantial elements of the plan deal with Irish as an ancient language with a long tradition and a broad heritage. It is commendable that the students are given an understanding of those old traditions and of our ancient Gaelic heritage. It is recommended, however, that the programme should have a balance between the above-mentioned aspects and the portrayal of Irish as a living contemporary language being used by thousands of people throughout the country on a daily basis.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching was very good in the classes observed. Certain teachers made commendable efforts to avoid dependence on translation from Irish to English to ensure the students’ understanding of the lesson content. This approach is highly commended. Some cases were observed, however, where a certain amount of translation from Irish to English was used unnecessarily and teachers are advised to be careful about this and to use other strategies to ensure students’ understanding as much as possible. The teachers’ overall commitment to the use of the target language in the class is commended.

Students’ use of target language to address questions and comments to teachers was noted. The vast majority of questions asked of students in the classes were answered in Irish. It was clear that the students had experience in using Irish and the teachers’ efforts in encouraging the use of the target language are commended. The teachers sought answers in Irish from students during the lessons observed.

Information and communications technology (ICT) was used during a couple of lessons observed and that usage is highly commended. It is recommended that the use of ICT be extended to all the lessons. ICT may be used as a valuable resource to show students film clips and television programmes in the class which add to their understanding of aspects of literature, of literary themes, and of abstract concepts. There was effective use of the whiteboard also to illustrate keywords, to show answers to questions and to present new vocabulary to students. Apart from the whiteboard and the use of ICT there were few other resources used during the Irish lessons. It is recommended that teachers use music, photographs, films, television programmes, the communications media, posters, podcasts and any other suitable materials during the lessons to place the lesson content in a contemporary context for students and to stimulate and develop their interest in learning the language.

Good efforts were made in most of the classes observed to provide opportunities for communication in the target language for the students via pair work and group work in the main. The use of these strategies is highly commended. It is recommended that these activities be extended to all the Irish lessons. It is important that students have opportunities to speak the target language as much as possible during the lessons. The teachers are advised to regularly review the pair and group activities they use in order to ensure that they necessitate conversation among the student in the target language.

The teachers were enthusiastic and energetic during the lessons. There was a good atmosphere in the classes and there was good interaction between the teachers and the students. Students were continually affirmed for their efforts and discipline was excellent. There were posters, examples of students’ work and other material relevant to the teaching and learning of Irish on display on the classroom walls and the teachers’ work in this respect is commended. Material of this kind can be a valuable resource for the teacher and the student during the lessons especially when the students are looking for examples of verbs or keywords to use in the formation of sentences.

A case was observed in which two poems were presented to students and they were asked to compare them in relation to common themes and characters. The students had to rewrite one of the poems in simple Irish also and this approach is highly commended instead of seeking a translation of the poem’s lines into English. Links were made between aspects of history, aspects of Irish literature and major issues such as racism. This approach is commendable as it places the learning of Irish and the content of the lessons in a wider context for students.

There was effective review of work covered during the lesson in one case observed and of the learning objectives achieved. It was an effective and beneficial way to end the lesson. It is
recommended that teachers place the subject of the lesson and the learning objectives up on the whiteboard at the start of the period and that it end with a quick review of what the students have learned.

ASSESSMENT

In-house examinations are organised twice a year, at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are issued to parents after these examinations. Contact with the parents is promoted via information evenings, parent-teacher meetings and other appropriate contacts also.

Mock oral examinations are organised for the students in sixth year and this additional support is commended. It is recommended, however, that a formal assessment of oral Irish skills be implemented from first year onwards. It is recommended also that the results of the assessment be shown as a separate item on the school reports sent home to the parents. School management and the Irish teachers should inform parents of the upcoming changes to the state examinations in Irish and of the increased importance of oral language in those examinations.

There was considerable amount of work to be seen in the copybooks observed and it was clear that the students’ work is assigned and corrected regularly. In the vast majority of cases observed the students’ work was carefully corrected with a description of the student’s progress and formative comments how to improve the work. Some cases were observed, however, where it was unclear who corrected the work - the student or the teacher. In addition, there was not sufficiently careful correction of grammatical errors. It is recommended that the teachers discuss a marking system which would ensure that the students would learn from the errors in the written work.

The number of students taking higher-level Irish for the Junior Certificate has increased in the last couple of years and there has been a great improvement in achievement in the state examinations. There are two higher-level classes in second year at present and the teachers reported that every effort will be made to keep as many of these students as possible undertaking the higher level. The teachers’ high expectations and their approach to keeping students at the higher level as long as possible are commended. The number of students taking higher-level papers in Irish for the Leaving Certificate has been steady in recent years but the achievement in Irish has greatly improved. It is recommended that an attempt be made now to increase the number of students taking higher level for the Leaving Certificate gradually, building on the work being done at Junior Certificate level.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The provision for Irish on the school timetable for the senior cycle is very satisfactory.
- Good efforts are made in the school to broaden and develop the students’ experience of Irish as a living language.
- The work done in relation to planning to date is commended.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication was very good in the classes observed.
- There was a good working atmosphere in the classes observed and students did their best to communicate with the teacher in Irish.
- The use made of ICT in certain classes observed is commended.
- The way in which opportunities for communication in the target language were created via pair work and group work is commended.
- The students’ achievement in state examinations has improved in recent years.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The school management are advised to examine the possibilities of providing an additional period for one of the year groups in the Junior Certificate.
- It is recommended that an attractive and stimulating extracurricular and cross-curricular programme be compiled for the school year, to support the teaching and learning of Irish.
- It is recommended that wider use be made of ICT and that a wider range of materials and resources be used during the Irish lessons.
- It is recommended that all students in the school undergo an oral examination from first year onwards.
- It is recommended that concerted efforts be made to keep the number of students taking higher level as high as possible up to the Leaving Certificate.

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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