Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St Goban’s College
Bantry, Co Cork
Roll number: 70930R

Date of inspection: 13 December 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Goban’s College, Bantry. 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 to the Irish 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

Irish has a high profile in the school. This is the result, in part, of the general community’s empathy with the language and Irish culture. The school community is highly supportive of Irish and is very proud of the success of the school’s Aonad Lán-Ghaeilge that was established some years ago. The Irish teachers are very committed to the promotion of Irish within school life and, particularly, to improving their students’ competence in the language. They are to be commended for the on-going energy and resourcefulness they bring to this work.

Currently, five teachers are involved in the teaching of Irish. Almost all of them teach Irish to the varying levels within the different programmes on offer. This is good practice.

The timetable is supportive of the teaching and learning of Irish. Junior-cycle students have four classes per week while senior-cycle students have six classes per week. Junior-cycle classes are of mixed ability while ordinary-level and higher-level bands are created at senior-cycle level. This method of allocating students to classes is in keeping with best practice.

Thirty-eight students are exempt from the study of Irish. This figure equates with nine per cent of the overall student cohort. Ten of these students have learning difficulties, while the remainder received their early education outside the state. Many of these students receive learning support or attend classes as part of the School Completion Programme while Irish classes are held. It was reported that there are a number of students who are entitled to an exemption but who choose to study Irish formally. This stems from the high status of Irish in local primary schools where a positive attitude towards the language is fostered in students. These students are praised for their efforts to participate in Irish lessons, as are their teachers who provide the necessary support and motivation.

Most teachers have their own classrooms and this enables them to store resources. They have ready access to a wide range of equipment, especially to Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Teachers have made a very good effort to create a stimulating learning
environment in their classrooms. Rooms are enhanced by the display of charts that also act as reference aids for teachers and students as they undertake their duties.

The school community is very proud of their collection of Irish books. Currently, there are over two hundred books in the collection and it was reported that this is being added to continuously. These books are available in one of the Irish classrooms and it was reported that many students display an interest in reading them.

The teachers attach great importance to the development of their professional skills and regularly engage in continuous professional development (CPD) activities. They all have a good standard of Irish and those who seek to spend time in the Gaeltacht, when they can, are due particular commendation. They avail of every opportunity to broaden the range of teaching and learning strategies they can use. In addition to attending in-service workshops provided by the Second-Level Support Service for Irish, a guest-speaker has come to the school to draw their attention to more specific elements of their practice. School management supports all of these activities and also presents teachers with other areas they can focus on as part of the school-development planning process.

There is a wide programme of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that promotes the use of Irish outside of the classroom. All of these activities are documented in a folder in which there is a noteworthy collection of certificates, letters of commendation and photographs. Activities organised include trips to areas of cultural interest, to literary workshops and to the Gaeltacht; convening of in-school literary workshops; visits from guest-speakers and participation in debating and poetry competitions. All those students who have won prizes in various competitions are due special mention. Seachtain na Gaeilge is a big event on the school calendar. A high level of preparation ensures that all members of the school community are provided with opportunities to speak Irish. The links that have been created between the school and Glór na nGaeil in Bantry town have proven worthwhile in that activities organised during this week can be extended outside of the school campus. The organising committee conducts an annual review of the events and the recommendations/advice arising from this process is of considerable benefit when planning future events.

**Planning and Preparation**

Irish teachers actively engage in the subject development planning process. While some of the areas they focus on collaboratively are being explored at a whole-school level, the Irish teachers also choose to analyse particular aspects of their own practice. The review processes that have been established are based on effective communicative channels and teachers are commended for the openness they bring to collaborative planning. Much of the discussion that takes place is at departmental meetings and is overseen by the subject co-ordinator. It is good that the position of co-ordinator is rotated.

The subject plan for Irish was reviewed. It gives comprehensive insight into the outcomes of the collaborative planning process. A lot has been done to develop common schemes of work. References to teaching strategies and resources that support the learning process in yearly plans were noted. Term-on-term plans specify the skills to be developed as various syllabus topics are covered. This is very good practice. The identification in the yearly plans of the various assessment methods to be applied as each topic is covered is also commended. The current area of focus the promotion of more open discussion of classroom practice between department members. To this end, teachers are reflecting on the quality of the learning during their own
lessons. In the event that they are particularly pleased with the outcomes of a lesson, they make the lesson notes and the resources utilised available in a specific folder. This is excellent practice.

In all instances, teachers had prepared in detail for the lessons delivered. They all made their lesson plan available. The content of these plans indicated that teachers had given appropriate consideration to the new elements of language to be acquired by students as well as to the activities that would enable them to practice using this language most effectively. Good practice was seen when students were set tasks that required them to practice the four language skills in a balanced way. Practice was even more effective when students were given a mix of individual and interactive tasks. It was also evident that all teachers had devoted time to locating and designing stimulating resources that supported the learning process.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Four Irish lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation. Teaching and learning was of a high standard with some instances of excellent practice.

Irish was the main language in use during all lessons. Teachers and students spoke Irish to each other at all times. The students are due particular commendation for making a very good effort to use their Irish. Their teachers are praised for establishing this good practice and also for fostering the self-confidence and the ability in their students to communicate through the medium of Irish.

Every teacher delivered a stimulating lesson that motivated students’ continuous engagement. The effective use made of a range of individual and interactive tasks resulted in worthwhile learning outcomes. Students were afforded regular opportunities to speak Irish. The requirement that they produce complete sentences when answering questions was noted. Many teachers also emphasised the importance of accurate pronunciation during speaking and reading tasks. This good practice should be extended.

All lessons were characterised by a positive atmosphere of co-operation. Students participated eagerly and diligently and teachers frequently praised their efforts. Effective use of differentiated approaches ensured that the content and activities were appropriate to students’ varying abilities. Students clearly had experience of working with one another and they undertook pair work and group work willingly. The outcomes of their collaborative work were successful. Best practice was observed when individual group members were assigned specific duties: one member as spokesperson, another as scribe, for example.

Questioning was used to good effect to assess student understanding of material that had been taught. Teachers’ use of a mix of direct and open questions is commended. Students’ responses were often used as a basis for developing the lesson further. Teachers readily accepted the responses offered and this, in turn, encouraged students to express their own opinions. This is very good practice as it requires students to compose their own sentences. Furthermore, the recognition of students’ opinions, interests and experiences encourages greater participation and promotes their self-confidence.

Many teachers availed of the opportunity to bring points of accuracy to students’ attention as they came across them during the lesson. Such efforts to convey to students how a grammatical rule is applied in practice are commended. In one instance, students’ oral analysis of work written by their classmates on the whiteboard proved a worthwhile activity. Good practice was also observed when students were required to practice orally different applications of the rule. Setting students
to orally manipulate sentences, phrases and idiomatic expressions is highly beneficial and it is recommended that this good practice be extended.

**ASSESSMENT**

Modes of assessment used include observation of class participation, assignment and checking of homework, correction of written tasks, teacher questioning, class tests and house exams. Certificate examination students undergo pre-examinations in the spring. House exams are common exams, a praiseworthy practice. It is commendable that students’ competence in the four language skills is assessed. It is also commendable that junior-certificate candidates take the optional oral examination.

The department’s homework policy outlines various types of tasks that can be assigned as homework. As a general guideline, teachers are advised that students have something ‘active’ to do every night. The recognition, in the policy, of learning and oral work as main homework tasks is commended.

Samples of students’ work were reviewed. Students had completed a wide range of written tasks and there was evidence that these tasks had been monitored regularly by their teachers. The use of self-assessment is good as it focuses students’ attention on aspects of their work which require improvement. Teachers had provided helpful feedback to their students regarding how they might improve the standard of their work. Teachers are reminded of the more innovative assessment strategies that have been emerging as part of Assessment for Learning (AfL). Their particular attention is drawn to those strategies that require students to critically analyse their own work and to take greater responsibility for improving the standard of their work. It is recommended that teachers explore the benefits of implementing some of these strategies.

Every effort is made to keep parents informed of their son’s/daughter’s progress. Reports are sent home after all major examinations, parent-teacher meetings are organised annually and parents are contacted individually as the need arises.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish has a high status in the school.
- Teachers’ commitment to the promotion of Irish in general was noted.
- Teachers are highly commended for their endeavours to enhance their students’ competence in Irish.
- The manner in which students are allocated to classes is in accordance with best practice.
- Teachers have ready access to a wide range of facilities and resources.
- The importance of continuing professional development is recognised.
- A wide programme of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities promotes the use of Irish outside the classroom.
- Teachers are actively engaged in the subject development planning process and the emphasis placed on review as an key component of this process is commended.
- Teachers had prepared comprehensively for the lessons observed.
- A high standard of teaching and learning was observed during lessons.
• Irish was the main language in use during all lessons.
• Every student was actively engaged in tasks assigned and worthwhile learning outcomes were evident at the end of all lessons.
• A co-operative atmosphere existed in all classes.
• Effective use was made of questioning.
• Grammar was taught in an integrated manner.
• The assessment system takes account of all four language skills.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• It is recommended that greater use be made of Assessment for Learning strategies.
• It is recommended that teachers continue to explore effective ways of sharing examples of good practice with each other.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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