

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St Patrick's College
Cavan
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AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

{ This is a translation of the original report which was written in Irish }

REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Phádraig, Cavan 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 and examined students' work. The inspector reviewed the school information request form on the subject. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Irish has a strong standing on the school timetable and there is a very good provision in both junior and senior cycles. A significant illustration of this is the six periods per week provided for Irish in fifth year and sixth year for the established Leaving Certificate. There is a good even distribution of the lessons throughout the week in each year. The arrangements on the timetable regarding students' access to the level which best suits their ability in the subject are good and these arrangements are being improved further. From the start of the 2010/11 school year, for example, concurrent timetabling will be available for all classes in third and sixth years.

A common course in Irish is taught in first year in mixed-ability classes. It is commendable that a conscious effort is made in first year to encourage the students to their highest level for the whole year so that the greatest possible number of students will attempt higher level from the start of the second year. This is a positive arrangement which shows the teachers' desire to promote the subject as much as possible. It would be worth reviewing the arrangement from year to year, nonetheless, based on the teachers' experience and on the students' progress with these arrangements in first year. If it is felt that it is to the students' benefit to keep mixed-ability classes for the entire year, the current practice should be continued. If it is felt that more progress would be made in setting classes earlier than the start of second year, this should be recommended to the principal. In that case timetable arrangements would be needed from then start of first year to establish parallel Irish classes, even if those arrangements were not to be used until as far as possible into the year. This is a recommendation for ongoing review, not a recommendation for changing the current arrangement. The existing arrangement in first year is positive and challenging and it will be even better if it is adhered to following review.

The number of students with an exemption from Irish is quite low, at about seven per cent of the total number of students. Attempts are made to provide resources to those students who hold such an entitlement when Irish is on the timetable. School management admits that this can only be done in a limited number of cases, an arrangement which means that students with exemptions are present at Irish lessons frequently. However, it was reported to the inspector that there was no interference with the Irish lessons as a result.

School management supports continuing professional development (CPD) in the subject and the six Irish teachers have had a good attendance at the activities of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. Seniority, continuity and rotation are taken into account in the allocation of classes to the teachers by school management. This is a good arrangement. The capacity of a subject department is greatly enhanced by ensuring that all the teachers gain experience of teaching all levels.

School management supports the development of resources in the subject. There is a storage press containing the common teaching resources assembled to date. These include video material in Irish and compact discs. The subject co-ordinator has the freedom to submit an application for resources to the management. Most of the six Irish teachers have their own classrooms and good efforts have been made in most cases to display attractive, stimulating material on the walls.

The information and communications technology (ICT) resources for Irish are being augmented. Three of the six teachers have data projectors and a small number of other portable projectors are available by booking. The three teachers are using their own laptop computers and the school's laptop computers may be obtained on loan. In addition, the computer room is available by booking. It is good that there is an increase in the resources by which students and teachers can find and engage with examples of spoken Irish.

It would be worth compiling a stock of Irish books in the newly-opened library. It is suggested making this a creative project in collaboration with the students and not to buy books just for the sake of it. Catalogues of Irish books could be obtained from the publishers, the publishers' websites viewed and material of interest chosen. It would be worth considering issuing an invitation to the school to Irish writers over time and in this way promoting the reading of Irish among the students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish teachers work together as a subject department and a co-ordinator is appointed from among the members for an agreed period. This arrangement is commendable, as the co-ordinator gets a wider view of the standing of Irish in the school in general by administering planning activities. In addition the co-ordinator is given the opportunity to put new ideas forward during the term. It is recommended that this aspect be included more in the co-ordinator's duties, that is that the co-ordinator would try to agree and promote an improvement programme in the subject during the co-ordination period in addition to the administrative duties that attach to the position.

Co-ordinated planning meetings in the subject are held four times per school year and the subject information form confirms that minutes are kept of those meetings. A plan for the subject has been agreed among the Irish teachers but neither that plan nor the minutes were provided to the inspector as part of the evaluation.

School management showed a great awareness of the subject planning activities for Irish, as well as the other subjects, and it was confirmed that work schemes for Irish are reviewed as a normal practice at co-ordinated planning meetings in the subject. It is recorded on the information form that two issues are being focussed upon at the moment in the Irish department. These are the promotion of ICT in teaching and learning and implementing a common teaching and assessment plan for Irish commensurate with the various levels in the subject. It is a good idea to link specific agreed priorities with co-ordinated planning matters in any particular year.

It is worth mentioning the most important points of a subject plan for Irish in this context. The Irish syllabus objectives should be to the fore in the plan, with assessment issues having an appropriate but secondary place. There should be a clear distinction between learning objectives from one level to the other and from one year to the next. It would be worth using the guidance regarding the quality of Irish to be acquired by learners at the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate as set out in the publication *European Languages Portfolio* as a guide to this. Therefore, a subject plan should be conceived and laid out in terms of learning objectives. In order to encourage input from all the teachers in collaborative planning matters, it would be good for the teachers to recommend reference material for the plan and to investigate and discuss that material among themselves. The best exemplars of their own students' work which fulfilled the objectives of the teaching could be included. This could be written work or recorded oral work. As regards the Transition Year plan for Irish, it is recommended that the reading material being studied be refreshed and also that experience of learning Irish in a new way be promoted with the students. The promotion of speaking Irish spontaneously and of Irish on the internet and in the media would be in keeping with the ultimate objective.

It would be well worth while including a discussion of teaching methods and resources in collaborative planning meetings. Arising from that a guide to the teaching methods and resources which best promote learning should be placed in the subject plan. Another issue to which attention must be paid is the setting of targets for the completion of certain aspects of the plans. Similar to this co-operation, it would be worthwhile for teachers to seek to promote practical co-operation amongst themselves. This could be done, for example, by swapping classes from time to time and obtaining a second opinion on the students' progress with the part of the teaching course just completed. This could be connected to any aspect of the four language skills. By approaching it creatively, two Irish teachers could try group-teaching occasionally in order to stimulate learning activities among the students. These recommendations should be taken into account especially in relation to first year and Transition Year in the first instance.

In parallel with these latter recommendations, it is recommended that every attempt be made to promote the speaking of Irish outside of the sole context of the Irish lesson and to acknowledge the value of those activities. This would require the co-operation of the school's teachers in general and it would be well worth seeking the support of the students' council also. Social and learning activities could be organised even for a limited period. Deciding on this is particularly important, taking into account the new recognition to be granted to competence in spoken Irish in the certificate examinations from 2012 onwards. A certain number of students go to the Gaeltacht every year and it would be good for such students to be to the fore in such activities. The most important thing is for the teachers to understand the value of promoting the subject on a departmental basis and launching improvements in general, in addition to just taking care of their own class groups. The Irish teachers in Coláiste Phádraig have this understanding.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Six lessons were observed during the inspection. The teaching in the vast majority of those lessons was of a high quality and a beneficial outcome was evident in the students' learning for the most part. It was clear that the lesson material had been planned well in advance and the planned lesson content was delivered in each case. The subject of the lesson was presented clearly as an introduction to all the lessons. It would also be worth sharing the learning outcomes associated with the lesson with the class group at the start as encouragement to the students to pay attention to the work at hand. It is good to question learners from time to time during the lesson to ensure that progress is being made with the lesson's learning objectives.

The students' level of competence was taken into account in the work set out for the lessons and good efforts were made to develop one theme and to integrate the various language skills within that theme. Where the teaching and learning was most successful, items of reading, writing, speaking and listening were being practised. Good attention was also paid to accurate pronunciation. The level of language sought of the students was commensurate with the age and competence of the students in all the lessons observed, for the most part. In one case, however, the range of language expected of the students was too challenging for the linguistic competence level of the students of that class. This required the use of technical words about the environment.

Attention was paid in planning lessons to the use of appropriate resources and to the students' range of interests. As an indication of this, photographs were displayed frequently of famous personalities in whom the students were interested, especially sports, television and film personalities. This helped to stimulate the students' interest and participation in the lesson activities. The students made good efforts to express themselves about the lesson content. This was evidenced by the answers to the teacher's questions. Care must be taken with the questions asked so that they are sufficiently differentiated to set an appropriate challenge to students with good competence. It was noted in certain instances that the questions asked were not challenging enough for the most competent students.

The target language was in use throughout in the teaching to guide and question the students. This is a good practice which moves the learner towards the target language as a normal practice in the learning. It was noticed in one lesson in the junior cycle dealing with naming the counties of Ireland correctly that that material was available in the textbook alongside English translations. No attention was paid to the translations however and information questions were asked in Irish about the counties instead of ensuring the students' understanding of them with English translations. The approach practised in this class was commended. The teachers were confident in their presentation and in their interaction with the students. Discipline was good throughout and there was good co-operation from the students in the lessons' activities.

The lessons kept to the work set out as an objective initially. The use of ICT resources was central in most lessons and good use was made of those resources in particular cases. This was completely in keeping with the priority placed on this measure in collaborative planning matters in the current year. In the case of a class/ lesson in the senior cycle, for example, understanding a scene from a well known Irish-language television soap was taking place. There were successful efforts made in this lesson to develop aural comprehension skills. The material itself was interesting and challenging, dealing with teenage life and the film helped to express the meaning and understanding of the words. This material was well suited to the objective of understanding conversation at normal pace. The inclusion of such material was preferable by far to an item of aural comprehension from past examination papers.

In another case, unfortunately, the electrical power failed at the start of the lesson where the teacher had prepared material to show with a data projector. This lesson demonstrated the capacity to adapt the lesson content to another approach, at short notice. In another case, it was clear that there would be benefit in discussing the type of material worth showing electronically and how the best use could be made of those resources. Guidance in this matter could be found by visiting a colleague's lesson. In certain cases, active work such as group work added to the variety of lesson work. The instructions were given clearly at the start and the teacher moved around the groups later helping them and asking them questions.

Regarding the students' learning, there was evidence in all the lessons observed that they understood the content being shared with them and that they were adding to their vocabulary and to their ability in the language dealing with the lesson content. This is an appropriate step forward in developing the learners' competence to express themselves in the language in

general apart from specific areas. In the inspector's discussion with students in the senior cycle they showed that they were able to talk confidently and they were keen to do so. Opportunities should be grasped with such students to get regular practice in speaking the language both inside and outside the classroom.

ASSESSMENT

There is a whole-school policy on homework and it is clear from the Irish copybook work that written homework is assigned and corrected on a regular basis for by far the greater part. The copybook work was commendable in many cases. They were neat and tidy and the teacher's acknowledgement of that work could be seen throughout. Although evidence of that was not seen in a series of copybooks in first year the quality of the work in those copybooks was highly commendable. It is recommended that the teacher's recognition of this work be placed in all the copybooks as normal practice. Regarding a lesson mentioned earlier in this report, where the range of language in the lesson was regarded as too challenging, the quality of the students' work as observed in the copybooks is commended. These copybooks contained comprehensive work on the various aspects of written language examined, the teacher had inserted corrections and helpful written guidance on composition work and other work. Copybooks examined in a class in Transition Year indicated that the reading material was being studied which was in keeping with reading material usually found on the Leaving Certificate programme. There is no constraint on placing some of this material on the TY programme but introducing new choices of material during that year is recommended also.

The oral questioning of students is central to the continuing assessment made of students' progress in the subject in the lessons. This was seen to be done effectively in the lessons observed. The teachers are advised to provide more opportunities to the students to practise speaking Irish on topics in general. This involves normal conversation.

Assessment of spoken Irish is included as one of the assessment methods for Irish in the school, as indicated in the information request form for the subject. In the absence of the subject plan being available it is not clear what recognition is given to spoken Irish in the house examinations or what procedures apply to its implementation. During this evaluation students in the senior cycle were being given advance experience of oral examinations for the Leaving Certificate. In order to promote spoken Irish more, it is recommended that consideration be given to entering students for the optional Junior Certificate oral examination. Such a measure would ensure an opportunity for them to get appropriate compensation for their efforts to acquire the spoken language. An appropriate emphasis on the development of spoken Irish would be in keeping with one of the basic aims of the Junior Certificate Irish syllabus as well as the other Irish syllabuses. In the absence of this, clear recognition should be given to competence in spoken Irish in all the house examinations from the start of first year onwards. This could be assessed instead of establishing individual oral examinations.

An analysis is made of the students' participation rate at the various levels in the subject in the certificate examinations as well as an analysis of the results. This analysis is well worth performing as a guide to reviewing the teaching and learning and as a pointer to the standing of Irish in the school in general. The school data provide a positive and encouraging picture regarding these matters. These data should be placed with the subject plan as a reference point on progress and as a guide for further improvement.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish has a good standing in the school timetable and there is good provision for it in both junior cycle and senior cycle.
- A conscious effort is made in first year to encourage the students to their highest level for the whole year so that the greatest number possible of students will attempt higher level from the start of the second year.
- Seniority, continuity and rotation are taken into account when allocating classes to the teachers by the management of the school.
- The ICT resources in the teaching and learning of Irish are being increased.
- The Irish teachers work together as a subject department and a co-ordinator is appointed from among the members for an agreed period.
- The teaching in the vast majority of the lessons observed was of a high quality and there were good results to be seen in the students' learning for the most part.
- The target language was in use by the teachers throughout to guide and question the students.
- There is whole school policy for homework and it is clear from the work in the Irish copybooks that written homework is assigned and corrected on a regular basis.

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

- It would be worth reviewing the arrangement regarding mixed ability classes for the whole year in the first year from year to year, based on the teachers' experience and on the students' progress under the current arrangements.
- Care must be taken with the questions asked of students so that they are sufficiently differentiated in order to pose an appropriate challenge also for those students with good competence.
- The teachers are advised to provide more opportunities to give students practice in speaking Irish on subjects in general. This involves ordinary conversation.
- In order to promote speaking of Irish more, it is recommended that consideration be given to entering students for the optional Junior Certificate oral examination.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.