Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

De La Salle College
Wicklow, Co. Wicklow

Roll number: 61850S

Date of inspection: 3 March 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in De La Salle College, Wicklow. 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 the 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

De La Salle College, Wicklow is a voluntary secondary school which will be amalgamated with another post-primary school in the town from September 2011 onwards. First-year students in De La Salle College are in mixed-ability classes for Irish. The students are then divided into three groups for second year: a higher-level class, a mixed higher and ordinary-level class, and an ordinary-level class. This arrangement continues into third year. For Transition Year (TY) the students are divided into a higher-level class, an ordinary-level class and a foundation-level class. This arrangement continues in fifth and sixth year, but there is not always a foundation-level class. Sometimes, the students are divided into one higher-level and two ordinary-level classes. The number of students taking higher-level papers in Irish in the Junior Certificate examination is quite satisfactory. The number taking higher-level Irish at Leaving Certificate level, in recent years, is disappointing; very few students attempt the higher level. It is recommended that the school management make it a priority to discuss this problem with the management of the new school, to ensure that the need to change this pattern is addressed from the outset.

Five class-periods per week for Irish are provided for all year-groups in both junior and senior cycles, including Transition Year, a very satisfactory arrangement.

Seven teachers are responsible for the teaching of Irish in the school. Two of the seven are appropriately qualified. The principal reported that probably only the two qualified teachers will be teaching Irish after the amalgamation with the other post-primary school. The necessity of having a fully qualified and competent team teaching Irish in the amalgamated school is clear.

Of the total enrolment of 423 students in the school, 71 have exemptions from the study of Irish. 38 of the exemptions are held by students who have learning difficulties and the vast majority of other exemptions are held by students from abroad who had no understanding of English or Irish when enrolling in the school.
Certain efforts are made in the school to broaden and develop students’ experience of Irish as a living language. Seachtain na Gaeilge is celebrated, for example, by organising a céilí, a quiz, a poster competition, a photographic competition and a ‘green’ day; as well as games and small-scale events as part of the normal Irish classes. It is recommended that this aspect of the teaching of Irish be taken into account when the staff and management of the school are planning for the amalgamation at the start of the coming school year. Irish language and cultural events enhance the work done by teachers in the classrooms and are important. It will be necessary to provide an interesting, stimulating extra-curricular and co-curricular programme for the students in the new school from the outset. The establishment of the new school affords an opportunity of initiating a new tradition in teaching and promoting Irish as a living language among the students.

**Planning and Preparation**

The teachers of Irish meet formally once a term. There is no co-ordinator of planning for the teaching and learning of Irish for some time past, because of the new arrangements for amalgamation with the other school. The teachers of Irish from the two schools are planning since 2006 for the teaching and learning of the language in the new school. The minutes of those meetings are available in English. It was evident during the evaluation that the majority of those teaching Irish lacked experience of speaking the language. It is strongly recommended that the Irish-teaching staff make every effort to use Irish among themselves as their working language, so that they would have that opportunity, at least, of practising their language skills.

The plan made available on the day of the evaluation, for the teaching and learning of Irish, was the one which the teachers from the two schools have been working on since 2006, using a common template for the various yeargroups and levels. The work done on the plan to date is commended and the co-operation of the teachers from the two schools as well as the hard work involved in preparing it is acknowledged. It is recommended, however, that the layout of the work schemes be changed so that the topics to be covered with each yeargroup and level appear on the same page as the methodologies and resources to be employed in the class as well as the learning objectives and the assessment methods to assess student learning. In this way, it is possible to view the subject-matter, the teaching methods, the teaching resources, the learning objectives for students and the assessment methods, on one page. Planning for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) should also form part of the plan for teaching Irish.

It was noted that the use of the target language in class is not mentioned in the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish, nor is the importance of teaching through the medium of the target language and the avoidance of the use of translation as a methodology. It is strongly recommended that this omission be addressed when further developing the plan later on. The plan is written in English only and the input of the management in the two currently existing schools was offered as a reason for this. It is recommended that the plan be provided in Irish, with a translation or synopsis in English for the management and parents if necessary.

An outline plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year was made available. This was just a seven-line plan. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish start planning properly, to provide a pleasant stimulating language-learning plan for TY students. TY offers teachers an invaluable opportunity of teaching subjects in novel, creative ways and the teachers of Irish should avail themselves of that opportunity in order to provide their students with a broad and interesting experience of Irish as a living language. A positive experience of learning the language and the promotion of language awareness in Transition Year should help to increase the number of students taking higher level in the Leaving Certificate examination.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the vast majority of classes observed, teachers made good efforts to use Irish as the language of teaching and communication. The teachers in those cases are commended for their efforts. In a few cases observed, a considerable number of instructions were given in English only and, in certain cases also, translation from Irish to English was liberally used. It is absolutely necessary that the target language be used as the language of teaching and class-management in all Irish lessons. Teachers should be careful to avoid using translation unnecessarily. It is recommended that from first year right through, the students be taught the class-management language they will require, to obviate the need for translating simple sentences into English over and over again. Although some cases were observed where the students were attempting to communicate in Irish with the teacher, there were other instances of students speaking English to the teacher without making any attempt to communicate in Irish. The teachers will need to discuss this issue among themselves and agree a policy on using the target language during Irish classes. As already mentioned, this policy and approach should also be mentioned in the plan for teaching the language.

The lack of qualifications in the language among some of the teachers was evident in the classes also, which proved a hindrance to students’ accurate acquisition of the language. It is recommended that opportunities to attend appropriate courses be provided for teachers if it is intended that they will teach Irish in the new amalgamated school.

Pair work was used in a few cases observed and this interaction during class is commended. It is necessary, however, that pair work or group work in a language class should result in students speaking to one another in the target language. It was felt that, in the vast majority of classes, no opportunities were provided for the students to speak Irish, apart from answering the teacher’s questions. It is suggested that, in the Irish classes, the teachers regularly use a wide range of strategies to get the students speaking the target language, strategies such as pair work, group work, language games, role-play and dialogue, according to the level and ability of the students in the class.

In the classes observed, the teachers were vigorous and active. They circulated among students, helping them, answering questions and ensuring that tasks set were being carried out correctly. The students were polite and discipline was excellent.

An overhead projector was used in a couple of classes observed and in one case an excerpt from a football match was shown to the students. In a number of classes also, effective use was made of the whiteboard to show correct answers and to record new vocabulary and phrases. Apart from those resources mentioned and the textbook, no other materials or resources were used during Irish classes. It is recommended that teachers use a much wider range of resources, for example, music, podcasts, films, Irish language television and radio programmes, posters, photographs, the print media and the internet and any other materials that would be attractive and useful to arouse student interest in the subject matter of the lesson and to make learning the language more relevant for them. The above mentioned aids can prove very helpful in placing the subject matter of a lesson in a modern context for the students, especially the content and themes of the literature course.

One lesson was observed where students were presenting project work in pairs. The students had to research a certain subject and present their findings to the class through the medium of Irish. This approach is commended. It is recommended that teachers require complete sentences from
students in reply to questions, rather than accepting single words. Opportunities must be created for students to gain experience of Irish syntax and of composing simple sentences accurately.

There was a good range of materials relating to the teaching and learning of Irish on display in a couple of rooms observed and the work of the teachers involved is commended. The majority of the Irish teachers have their own classrooms, which affords them the opportunity of creating a stimulating environment with an Irish flavour in the rooms. It is recommended that all teachers create such an environment and that materials be put on display which would support students’ learning and would help the teachers to avoid overuse of translation to English.

**ASSESSMENT**

Formal school exams are conducted at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent to parents following those exams. Common exams are organised for first years and for any other yeargroups where more than one class are taking Irish at the same level. The teachers’ work in this regard is commended.

It was reported that sixth-year students take an oral test as part of their ‘mock’ exams. Sometimes fifth years also take an oral text. The work of teachers in this regard is commended, but it is recommended that all students in the school have an oral component in their exams, starting in first year. It would be advisable for the teachers to discuss this suggestion with their counterparts in the other school, in order to implement best practice from the outset. Teachers could exchange classes to conduct these oral texts. The content of course 4B provided by the Second Level Support Service for Irish, which is being made available at present, is focused on the assessment of oral Irish. The teachers of Irish should find plenty of ideas and guidance at these courses regarding the best ways of assessing oral language.

There was plenty of student work in many of the copybooks inspected. Some had been carefully corrected, but in other cases, the correction was somewhat unsatisfactory. It is necessary to explain to the students what mistakes they are making, besides just underlining them. It is recommended that the teachers agree a correction system which would ensure that the students learn from their mistakes and which would give them guidance and advice on improving their work.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The provision for Irish on the school timetable, with five class-periods per week allocated to each yeargroup, is very satisfactory.
- Some good efforts are made in the school to broaden students’ experience of Irish as a living language by celebrating Seachtain na Gaeilge.
- The collaboration between the two schools on the common plan for the teaching and learning of Irish, to be used in the new amalgamated school, is acknowledged.
- Good efforts were made, in the classes observed, to use Irish as the language of teaching and communication.
- The work of the teachers in setting common, in-house tests for appropriate classes 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 a co-curricular and extra-curricular programme for Irish be discussed and planned with the teachers in the new amalgamated school, so that a language supportive tradition can be established in the new school from the start.
- It is recommended that the work schemes for Irish be developed, in order to give more information on the use of resources in class, as well as on the use of a range of methodologies and assessment methods.
- It is recommended that a stimulating, interesting plan be devised for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year.
- It is recommended that teachers ensure that the target language is always used in class between teachers and students and that the number of opportunities for communication between the students in the target language be considerably increased. Every student in the school should be required to take oral tests from first year right through.
- It is recommended that a wider range of materials and resources, including ICT, be used in teaching Irish.
- It is recommended that the teachers plan, with the management and teachers of the new school, the best means of implementing strategies to increase considerably the number of students taking higher-level Irish in the Leaving Certificate.

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

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