Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Grennan College,
Thomastown, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70640I

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Grennan College, Thomastown, conducted 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

First year students are divided into an ordinary and a higher-level class after common Christmas examinations in first year. These arrangements continue in second and third year but the students are allowed to move between the levels if necessary having presented the teacher with a change of level form signed by their parents. Although it is reported that students’ progress is closely monitored in order to keep them at the appropriate level, it is recommended that some thought be given to leaving that division into higher and ordinary level until the beginning of second year so as to give the students the opportunity to develop their linguistic ability. If students are put in an ordinary-level class too early, there is a danger that they will accept that this is where they should be regardless of their potential ability.

As Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school, there is one mixed-ability class group for Irish in TY. There is one ordinary and one higher-level class group in fifth and sixth year. All the classes in junior cycle have four periods of Irish a week. It is recommended that the possibility be explored of providing a fifth period of Irish for at least one year of junior cycle. There are three periods a week for Irish in TY. It is recommended that school management review this provision and increase it to four periods a week, if possible. An extra allocation of time for Irish might help to increase the numbers of students taking Irish at higher level in senior cycle over time. There are five periods of Irish a week in fifth year, and sixth year has six periods, including a double period. The provision for Irish in fifth and sixth year is good and school management is commended for providing the sixth period in sixth year. However, this extra provision might be more usefully allocated in the junior cycle or in TY.

Three teachers are responsible for the teaching of Irish in the school. The Irish teachers all have the appropriate qualifications and they rotate classes between them, under the direction of school management. Generally, however, two out of three of the teachers take all the higher-level classes. All the teachers should have the opportunity to teach all levels so as to expand and develop their experience and understanding of the various levels as appropriate.
Worthwhile efforts are made in the school to celebrate “Seachtain na Gaeilge” with a poster competition and a table quiz. It was reported that efforts are made to encourage the students to speak Irish and the school principal makes many announcements in Irish during that week. The efforts of the teachers in this regard are commended but it is recommended that a year-long co-curricular and extra-curricular programme of events be developed. Many practical recommendations were made to the principal during the feedback meetings regarding activities and events which could be organised. It would be worthwhile asking students in TY to have an input into the organisation of Seachtain na Gaeilge and other events relating to Irish.

It was reported that some students go to the Gaeltacht every year but there were no definite figures available during the inspection in relation to this. It is recommended that school management and the Irish teachers discuss this issue with parents and their children reminding them of the advantages of attending an Irish or Gaeltacht course. They should be provided with specific information regarding courses available locally and further afield.

The Irish teachers have their own classrooms, affording them the opportunity to create a simulating learning environment for Irish. In light of this fact, it was disappointing to see that little material in Irish was displayed on the walls of these classrooms. It is recommended that the teachers display posters, grammar charts, photographs, students’ work and other material relating to the teaching of Irish thus creating a valuable resource for use during the classes to support student learning.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Teachers of Irish meet once a term as a group. Minutes were provided from these meetings, mostly in English. The business of the department should be recorded in Irish with a summary or report in English for management if necessary. The teachers come together regularly on other occasions to discuss issues relating to the teaching and learning of the language in the school. The minutes of the meetings record discussions of the following: allocation of students to classes; the results of in-house examinations; the suitability of the in-house examination papers; an analysis of the results of the state examinations, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

One of the teachers is acting as co-ordinator of planning for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. That teacher is nominated on the basis of seniority. The role of the co-ordinator includes calling departmental meetings and attending all Irish in-service courses. All the Irish teachers in the school have attended in-service courses given by the Second Level Support Service for Irish and some have attended ICT night courses and this is commendable.

A plan was provided for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. Although the work carried out on the plan to date is commended, it is recommended that it be further developed and that more details be included regarding approaches, methodologies, strategies for communication and resources to be used in lessons. It is recommended that a detailed list of the materials and resources available in the school for the teaching and learning of Irish be compiled for inclusion in the Irish plan. Another central part of the plan should be the use of ICT. ICT is being utilised by some of the staff in certain lessons but that use is not reflected in the plan as of yet.

A TY plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was also provided on the day of the inspection. Although the aims mentioned in the plan are commended, many more details about what exactly happens during Irish lessons from week to week should be provided, as well as what innovative
and creative methodologies are being used to give students the opportunity to experience Irish as a living language. TY affords the teachers great opportunities to teach subjects and languages to students without the same emphasis on examinations. It is recommended that the teachers set out a comprehensive TY programme which would give the students the opportunity to experience Irish in new creative ways.

Most of the Irish teachers had done very good planning for the lessons observed. ICT material, posters, information sheets and notes were prepared for most classes which meant that there was a good pace to the classes and that suitable material was available to support learning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, communication and instruction in most of the Irish lessons observed. In those cases, the dedication of the teachers to using the target language is commended. In a small number of cases observed, however, direct translation from Irish to English was used to ensure students understood lesson content. It is recommended that the Irish department’s general good practice in relation to the use of the target language be listed as a basic principle in the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school.

In some cases observed, the aim of the lesson was given to the students at the beginning of the period and very clear learning objectives were presented to the students. This is good practice, as it gives a certain responsibility to the students in relation to their own learning. Class work was prepared by explaining and demonstrating the various activities to the students on the whiteboard as well as by giving them the appropriate vocabulary and terminology. This is good practice.

The students participated in all the classes observed. The teachers’ questions were answered and there was active participation in classroom activities. Although students’ errors in grammar and pronunciation were occasionally corrected, there was not enough attention paid to this aspect of teaching. It is recommended that a list be made of the students’ basic mistakes during class activities, for example role playing, and that these be covered with the class before the end of the lesson. This would enhance student learning and lessen the chance of homework containing many errors. It was felt in some cases observed that the students’ range of Irish vocabulary and linguistic structures could be developed and it is recommended that this objective be monitored and that the students’ range of vocabulary be expanded, as appropriate.

The use made of ICT in some classes observed is highly commended. Teaching and learning were greatly improved by the effective use of technology and it was evident that the students both benefited from and enjoyed its use. In one case observed, comics were used to add to students’ understanding of a story from folklore and in another case the extracts, which are to be read as part of the Leaving Certificate Examination in Irish, were displayed on a screen while students listened to recordings of these extracts at the same time. The use of these resources is highly commended. In some other lessons, use was made of posters to show and explain the content of the lesson to the students and this approach is commended.

Except for the above-mentioned examples and ongoing use of the white board, there were few other resources used in the Irish classes. It is recommended that the amount of materials being used at present be increased and that use be made of a broader range of resources, for example, music, film, the Irish language media, including TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltachta, posters, charts, photographs and any other interesting material relevant to the lesson being taught. A broad range
of resources makes it possible to effectively contextualise prose passages and poetry and regular use should be made of them. It was clear in some cases observed that recommendations and methodologies from in-service courses run by the Second Level Support Service for Irish were being implemented in lessons and the efforts of teachers in this regard are highly commended.

Communicative strategies were continually used in the Irish lessons, including pair work, role playing and group work. The use of such strategies is highly commended, as they ensure applied target-language usage for the students in class which increases their confidence in speaking the language. However, regular review of the suitability and effectiveness of those strategies is necessary in order to ensure that they achieve their aim of encouraging students to speak. One case was also observed in which there was effective preparation for the Leaving Certificate oral examination. There was a good variety of activities and approaches in that class, with students working in pairs on questions prepared by the teacher, answering open questions from the teacher and listening to and practising the passages to be read aloud. Time was also spent on answering questions in the conditional mode.

There was pleasant interaction between the teachers and the students in the lessons observed. Time was spent in some lessons going from student to student or from group to group ensuring that they understood what was to be done and that they were applying themselves to their work. In general, there was good interaction between the students and the teachers and discipline was excellent in all the classes observed.

**ASSESSMENT**

Formal in-house examinations are organised in the school at Christmas and in the summer. The students’ oral skills are assessed in sixth year before the oral examination of the Leaving Certificate. This approach is commended. It is recommended that it be adopted for all year groups and that oral skills be formally assessed from first year onwards. The results of oral assessments should be included as a separate item in the reports sent home to parents. It is vitally important that both students and their parents understand the importance of spoken Irish in the certificate examinations in the context of the substantial changes that are planned for the allocation of marks to the oral Irish examination.

A lot of work was completed by students in the copybooks examined. The methods of correction varied, however. Some of the copybooks were very carefully corrected with a grade or a mark and comments in Irish about the standard of the work. There were other copybooks, however, in which there were only ticks to be seen and in which there were many mistakes made by the students which the teacher had not noted. It is recommended that teachers look at a common system of corrections which would be implemented for all the class groups and which would give the students an insight into their progress in an ongoing transparent way.

There is an ordinary-level and a higher-level class group for Irish in fifth and sixth year. However, the number of students in the higher-level class in fifth year is lower than in the ordinary-level class. The number of students taking higher level further declines in sixth year so that generally only a small number sits the higher-level Irish paper in the Leaving Certificate. It is recommended that school management and the Irish teachers explore ways to increase the number of students taking higher level for the Leaving Certificate Examination over time.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The efforts of the teachers in regard to celebrating Seachtain na Gaeilge in the school are commended.
- The work carried out on the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish is commended.
- Very good planning was evident for most classes observed.
- Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, instruction and communication in most of the classes observed.
- The effective use made of ICT in some lessons observed is commended.
- The way in which a range of communicative strategies was used in the majority of the lessons observed is commended.
- Good interaction was observed between the students and teachers and discipline was excellent.

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

- School management should look at the provision for Irish in the timetable for the classes at junior cycle and in TY.
- An interesting extracurricular and co-curricular programme of events should be provided for Irish during the whole year.
- The plan for teaching and learning Irish in the school should be further developed and that details about methodologies and resources, including ICT, which are to be used in the classes, be added to it. It is recommended that the Irish plan for TY be reviewed also.
- A broader range of materials and resources should be employed in all the Irish classes.
- Teachers and school management should reflect on the division of students between higher-level and ordinary-level classes in first year and delay it until the start of second year.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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