REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Conleth’s Vocational School. 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 the Irish teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Saint Conleth’s Vocational School is a participant in the scheme Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.

There is good support for Irish in the school and provision for the subject is good. The teaching staff for Irish comprises two fully-qualified teachers whose competence in spoken Irish is satisfactory for its teaching. The teachers perform their work with energy and enthusiasm and place much emphasis on presenting the subject to the students in a manner which is close to their life experience. The teachers have opportunities to teach the subject at the various levels and in the different programmes. Their experience in implementing the syllabuses and the various programmes to certificate examination level comprises an important element in their professional development.

The amount of time allocated to Irish in senior cycle is very good. However, there is a need to increase the number of class periods available for the subject in junior cycle. Most class groups have a single class period on a daily basis. It is recommended that double periods as occurs in the case of first years for example, or more than a single class period per day be avoided when the timetable is being designed.

There is a good supply of resources and aids and the teachers are actively involved in adding to what is available. Plans are in hand to develop a mobile library. This development is commendable because of the importance of having reading material available to the students in order to strengthen and extend their ranges of language usage. Both teachers of Irish have their own base-rooms which are bright and well-equipped. It is commendable that both rooms are adjoining. It is reported that a laptop computer, a digital data projector as well as the school’s computer room are available on a booking basis. The teachers recognise their need to develop their skills in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a tool for teaching
and learning. The teachers and management deserve praise for availing of the Second Level Support Service for Irish to provide workshops for them in the use of ICT and for attending other workshops being provided by the Service.

A range of activities and competitions is organised to celebrate Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Week). It should be remembered that it is not necessary to limit such activities to that particular week only. It is reported that in organising such activities, the teachers get much support from the other members of the school’s teaching staff. The week is also used for cross-curricular development of the learning and in this regard an Irish Breakfast is organised during the week. The activities engaged in during the week and the support provided by other members of the teaching staff reflects a very positive whole-school approach to support students’ learning in Irish.

It was reported that thirty two per cent of the second-level students enrolled in the school had an exemption from Irish. This level of exemption is very high. More than half were students who did not have English or Irish when they enrolled in the school and the remainder had recognised learning needs.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish department is very well coordinated. The teachers share the responsibilities and a very good open level of cooperation between them was clear from the meetings convened during the inspection. Formal meetings are convened twice annually and additional meetings are convened regularly during class periods for which the teachers were not timetabled. This demonstrates that planning is treated as an integral part of teaching and learning. Good quality minutes are kept of all meetings. It is clear form the subject plan that teachers recognise planning involves ongoing work. In particular, the teachers’ cooperative approach towards planning for the teaching and learning, including assessment, is commendable.

The subject plan is of very good quality. The aims indicate that good efforts are made to set realistic but challenging aims for the learning of Irish in the school. They indicate that the students’ expectations in the learning of Irish are being raised and the emphasis on its presentation as a living communicative language. It shows that ongoing development of the plan is taking place and that the teachers reflect on the implementation of the syllabuses. This is very good practice. The developmental work undertaken on the plans for the various year groups in the junior cycle and in the case of first year in particular is very good. It is clear that the planning work aims to conduct a thematic integration of the development of the language skills and the various elements of the courses. The planning template used for junior cycle directs appropriate attention to the language functions and grammar, together with assessment and teaching strategies, for example. With a view to perfecting the planning for the various year-groups and levels, it is recommended that an additional column be included in this template to detail the expected learning outcomes. These could be linked to the language functions. They should be used as criteria for assessment, including homework. They would also assist the direction of learning differentiation in the classroom. In order to support this in the planning for first year, it is recommended that the teachers consult Curaclam na Bunscoile: Gaeilge (www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Curriculum/Primary_Gaeilge_Curriculum.pdf). The revised template should also be used in the case of senior cycle classes. Regarding the content, reference should be made to poems and songs covered in class, in addition to those prescribed, in junior classes in particular. Regarding Gaeilge Chumarsáideach (Communicative Irish) in the Leaving Certificate Applied, it is recommended that more detail be provided on the content of the key assignments.
completed in the school in the various modules. In addition to the references in the plans to the methodologies in use, it is recommended that short accounts be developed on their implementation.

It is recommended that reflection and review be conducted on that part of the plan under the heading “Forálacha chun déileáil le riachtanais idirghéantaíthe Daltaí” (Provisions for dealing with the differentiated needs of Students”) to ensure that all practices listed therein are in accordance with recognised good practice, and to focus attention on ways for effective differentiation of teaching and learning the subject.

Planning and preparation for the individual classes observed was of a high standard. The benefit arising from this work was the provision of a definite structure for the classes. Very good preparation was done on the design of work sheets, the selection of suitable authentic resources from the media and the development of authentic listening texts.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in Irish was very good. At the commencement of every lesson the vocabulary learned as homework, or other material which was learned already by the students on a particular theme, was checked as they responded to the roll-call. In the presentation of lessons best practice was found in the instances where the students were made aware of what they would be enabled to do as an outcome of the work being undertaken during the class, and where the same learning outcomes were being recorded on the white board. In order to perfect this work, the students should be asked to reflect on their learning at the end of class with the aid of prompt questions such as what did you learn today? and how did you learn it? It would be preferable that they answer the questions orally, especially at first, to ensure they understand what is required, while they could also record their answers in their copybooks as their skills are being developed.

A very suitable range of activities was employed in the lessons observed. The thematic integration of the development of the main language skills which formed the basis for the work was a strength in all lessons observed. This approach helps to respond to the students’ various learning styles. Special praise is due for the use being made of authentic texts in this work. Included here are pictures from the print media of famous people whom the students were aware of. It was clear that the listening comprehension texts, which had been developed by using the voices of other teachers on the school staff, were very effective.

Observation of work was being done on the writing skills in senior cycle and a review of samples of students’ work reflected best practice in the approach used and that the integration of the various elements of the course was very good. An effective link was made between a relevant proverb and the lesson theme in particular instances. This created an opportunity to develop the students’ cultural awareness.

In accordance with the planning work, the grammar was introduced to the work in a manner which suited the students. The work done on developing students’ ability to use the copula in the junior cycle is praised in particular.

A few examples of pair work were observed. The use of pair and group work should be developed further. It is necessary, as part of such development, to take into consideration at the planning and preparation stage, the language required by the students for the tasks to be
undertaken in groups. This would help to provide better support to students in the use of Irish when undertaking the work, in particular in order to ask each other questions, an element which should be further developed. Key words or idioms could be recorded on PowerPoint slides, on posters, or on transparencies and placed within easy view of students when undertaking the task. The tasks given to pairs of students were realistic and feedback was accessed from the groups. It is necessary, however, to adhere to the time limits assigned to a task.

Irish was both the teaching medium and the main language of communication in all classes. In some instances it is necessary to ensure that more Irish be heard from the students themselves. Some students used Irish when putting questions to the teacher. This added to the use of Irish as a medium through which students were enabled to engage in real communication. The regular language required by the students for class should be taken into consideration in the planning, and its use should be extended.

The teachers created a positive learning atmosphere for the students where mutual respect was obvious and where students were able to make good progress in their learning.

ASSESSMENT

The students’ learning is monitored regularly and a suitable range of methods is used for this purpose in the case of some classes. In terms of assessment, best practice was present in those instances where the four main language skills were taken into consideration. It is recommended that teachers ensure spoken Irish is included in the assessment of each student’s learning as mentioned in the plan. In accordance with good practice and with the planning being done, a common examination is prepared for first year students.

Homework is assigned and corrected regularly in the case of each class observed. Based on a review conducted on a sample of students’ homework diaries, the skills involved in their usage as an aid to support their learning should be developed. A review of a sample of the students’ written work indicated that the work was very well organised in most instances. In these instances the students could use their copybooks and folders as aids for reference and study. It was evident in some instances, however, that there was a lot of emphasis on the provision of English versions alongside Irish versions of written tasks for example. A review of the use of this practice should be conducted and other strategies, which would assist students to be more independent as learners, should be employed. Notes of encouragement and marks were inserted in the work. In the context of planning, it is recommended that the teachers of Irish agree an approach to correction based on the principles associated with assessment for learning (AFL). As occurs, students would get recognition for the work done well or accurately but it is also recommended that they be made aware of gaps in their learning and be advised on ways to improve their work. Further information on AFL is available at [www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl](http://www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl). It was reported that work was underway on the school’s homework policy. The recommendations in this report with regard to the correction of students’ work should be taken into consideration therein and it should be ensured that it will be sufficiently flexible so that a variety of homework tasks can be assigned to support the development of the four main language skills.

The teachers maintain very good records on the students’ achievements. An analysis of their achievements in the certificate examinations is not conducted. The majority of students undertake the ordinary level while some take the higher level. In line with the department’s aim, the results obtained in recent years indicate that only rarely do students take the foundation level. As part of the planning done for the school’s participation DEIS with regard to increasing the students’
expectations and levels of participation and achievement, the teachers of Irish should take note of achievements in both the in-house and state examinations. The results of any analysis should be taken into consideration in the plan and be used as a guide for any monitoring and review of the subject plans for the various year groups.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good support for Irish in the school and the level of provision for the subject is also good. The teachers of Irish are fully qualified and their competence in spoken Irish for the purpose of teaching is satisfactory.
- The subject plan is of very good quality. The teachers have high expectations for the students’ learning and they engage cooperatively in planning for teaching and learning.
- The quality of teaching and learning in Irish was very good. The lessons had a very definite structure, a very suitable range of activities was used, and the thematic integration and development of the main language skills and the various aspects of the courses was a strength in all classes observed.
- In the presentation of lessons, best practice was observed in instances where the students were made aware of what they would be enabled to do as an outcome of the work undertaken during class.
- Irish was used both as the teaching medium and the main language of communication in all classes.
- The teachers created a positive learning atmosphere for the students where mutual respect was obvious, and where students were able to make good progress in their learning.
- In terms of assessment, best practice was associated with those instances where all the language skills are taken into consideration.

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

- It is recommended that management increases the number of class periods available to the subject in junior cycle, and to ensure an even distribution of class periods in the case of each class group during the week.
- In order to improve still further the planning for the year-groups and the various levels, it is recommended that the expected learning outcomes be defined, that they be used as criteria for assessment and that students’ achievements in house and state examinations be used in the monitoring and review of subject plans.
- Regarding Gaeilge Chumarsáideach in the Leaving Certificate Applied, it is recommended that more detail be provided on the content of the key assignments undertaken in the school in the various modules.
- It is recommended that further development and more use be made of pair and group work, and that opportunities be created for the students to ask as well as to answer questions.
- It is recommended that all language skills be included when assessing students’ learning in all cases.

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

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

There is difficulty increasing the number of class periods allocated to Irish at Junior Cert level due to

- Timetable constraints
- The amount of learning support required for students with Irish exemptions puts a strain on resources, particularly with cutbacks in Pupil Teacher Ratio.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

- Irish library area has already been set up
- Computer and overhead projectors have been acquired for Irish Department and are in the process of being installed