An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection of Irish

REPORT

St. Brendan’s College
Bray, County Wicklow
Roll Number: 61790D

Date of inspection: 5 February 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Brendan’s College, Bray. 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 the deputy principal. The board of management 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

First year classes in St. Brendan’s College are mixed ability. Students are divided among ordinary level and higher level in second year based on the results of examinations in first year, at Christmas and in the summer. The opinions of the teachers and the students themselves are taken into account also. For the most part there is one higher level class in second and third years, with two ordinary level classes. Efforts are made to schedule two of the three Irish classes simultaneously in the junior cycle to facilitate movement between the levels for students if necessary. Occasionally a foundation level class is provided subject to demand. In Transition Year there is one mixed ability class and one ordinary level class. In fifth and sixth years there is a higher level class and two ordinary level classes though one of those classes functions at foundation level occasionally depending on the group of students involved.

Four periods per week are provided for all classes in the junior cycle and three periods per week for Transition Year. The school management is strongly advised to review this provision and to provide an additional class for at least one year-group in the junior cycle. It is also recommended that an additional period be provided for Transition Year. It is difficult to provide a stimulating and interesting programme over three periods per week and to ensure continuity in learning. There are five periods per week available for fifth and sixth years, a provision which is quite satisfactory.

At present there are four teachers teaching Irish in the school. All have the appropriate qualifications but one of them was absent on leave at the time of the inspection and a qualified teacher was substituting for that person. The teachers switch the classes among themselves and this is a good practice as each of them has the opportunity to teach all levels and year-groups.

Thirty six students from a total enrolment of three hundred and fifty four in the school have exemptions from studying Irish. Of these, six are for students raised abroad until the age of eleven, seventeen are for students with learning difficulties and thirteen are for students from abroad.
It was reported that there are few Irish-language activities in the school outside of teaching the language in the classes. It is important to have an extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme in Irish supporting the teachers’ efforts in the classrooms. The teachers are advised to discuss this issue among themselves and to compile a programme, maybe starting with activities during Seachtain na Gaeilge, to give the students experience of Irish as a living language in various situations outside of the classroom. A programme of activities could gradually be extended across the whole school year.

It was obvious from the interaction with students in the classes that some of them visit the Gaeltacht in the summer and the effect of the summer courses was clear in places in terms of the students’ confidence and ability to speak the language. It is recommended that the Irish teachers and school management convey the advantages of a period on an Irish-language course to parents and students. There is a wide range of courses available in summer on a daily basis locally and further from home on residential courses.

Some posters and examples of students’ work were displayed in some of the classrooms. The work of those who try to create a stimulating Irish-language environment in the classrooms is commended. This material could be significantly increased in other cases, however, and this is recommended. Posters, grammar charts, students’ work and other material can be used effectively during Irish classes to support teaching and learning and as an aid to avoid translation from Irish to English.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish teachers meet as a group once per term. Minutes from those meetings are available in English. Matters discussed at these meetings mostly cover planning for Irish in the school, planning for Transition Year, an analysis of state examination results, textbooks and organisation for common examinations in the subjects.

There is no coordinator nominated among the Irish teachers to take responsibility for coordination of planning for teaching and learning Irish in the school. The principal reported that it is intended to introduce this system in school shortly and it is recommended that this be done as soon as possible. It is also recommended that the coordinator be nominated on a rotation basis so that each teacher is given the opportunity to play a leading role in planning each part of the teaching and learning of Irish in the school.

A plan was provided for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school on the day of inspection. The plan includes a general description of the Irish department and of the work to be done with the various levels and year-groups. Much of the plan is written in English and it is recommended that this be rectified immediately. A summary of the plan may be provided for the school management in English if necessary but the department’s work and the work on the plan for teaching and learning the language should be done in Irish. It is recommended that the plan for teaching and learning of Irish in the school be developed further. The plan should cover a description of the Irish department, including approaches, the layout of work and allocation of classes. In addition it should contain information about the work programmes to be followed by students as well as an account of teaching methods, communications strategies, aids and resources to be used with the different year-groups and levels. It is recommended that planning for the use of information and communications technology (ICT) be a central part of the plan also. Courses in the use of ICT in the Irish classroom are being organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish in all the education centres throughout the country at the moment. It would be worth taking advantage of these courses which are a valuable resource for Irish teachers.
A plan was provided for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year. Though aspects of the plan are very interesting it would be good to lay the course out from week to week and to ensure that the course has a very practical basis and that the students have regular opportunities to use the target language and to participate in classes. Though it is important to give the students a taste of the country’s learning and heritage it is also worth investigating developments in the life of contemporary Irish. It would be worth reviewing the course regularly and considering bringing groups and visitors to the school to give the students the opportunity to experience Irish as a living language. For those with good Irish and an interest in communications media matters it would be worth investigating the week-long communications course organised by Gael Linn for Transition Year.

There was careful planning for all the classes observed. Notes and worksheets were prepared for distribution to students in the classes. The work done on PowerPoint slides for one class and the postcards provided in another case were commended.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and contact was very good indeed in some classes observed and the teachers are commended for their commitment to the use of the target language in those cases. Some cases were observed, however, where there was too much emphasis on the use of translation from Irish to English as an instrument to ensure the students’ understanding of the lesson content. It is well understood that there is a challenge in using the target language with classes which are not that competent in Irish, but having said that the teachers must discuss the issue among themselves and agree a policy on it. Various strategies can be used which allow the teacher to avoid the use of translation on a regular basis. The policy and the approach to use of the target language should be mentioned specifically in the plan for the teaching and learning of the language in the school.

Questioning was used in many of the classes as a strategy to assess the students’ level of knowledge and as a strategy to encourage students to talk. Open questions and low-order and high-order questions were used and in certain cases this succeeded in encouraging students to participate in the class. In once case observed the teacher asked students questions dealing with subjects they themselves were interested in. The conversation was allowed develop and to continue following subjects chosen by the students as topics of conversation. The conversation only lasted about five minutes but it was an effective strategy to set students talking and they clearly enjoyed it. Pair work was used in a couple of cases observed too and it was an effective device to give students the opportunity for communication and talking. This practice must be extended to all classes as well as other devices to stimulate communication, for example role-playing, group work and language games. Speaking opportunities must be provided for students in each Irish class, not just through answering questions.

ICT was used in one case observed and the attractive slides prepared by the teacher greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the teaching and the work done in preparing the lesson was commended. However it should be ensured that whatever material displayed on screen or on the white board contains accurate Irish. The manner in which real postcards were used in one class observed to encourage students to work on writing postcards home from holidays was commended. This added to the students’ interest in the lesson content and it was also intended to organise a competition for the best postcard designed by a student in the class. Apart from the two cases mentioned above and the effective use of the white board in the vast majority of the classes, few resources were used in the Irish classes. It is strongly recommended that the number of aids and resources used in the classes be greatly increased. Music, photographs, posters, charts, films, items from television programmes, newspapers and other appropriate materials should be used regularly in the Irish classes. These resources can be collected over
time and they are a great help in the classroom to place the lesson content in a contemporary context for students. The Irish communications media are valuable aids too and they should be regularly used as well as podcasts from RTÉ and Raidió na Gaeltachta as listening lessons.

A writing lesson which was very effective indeed was observed during the inspection. Good strategies were worked out to encourage students to work and to build on the work the class had done before in a graduated way. Time was spent on the enrichment of Irish and on grammar matters. Though it was a very good lesson it is not recommended that one class period be spent dealing with teaching one of the language skills. Students in each class should have the opportunity to practise each of the language skills: listening, comprehension, writing and speaking. A lot of time was during another class period on writing matters in class. It is recommended that students be asked to do most of their writing as homework as opposed to doing that work during teaching. Again, it is important to give the appropriate time to each of the language skills during the class periods.

Teachers succeeded in setting students to work in a good number of the classes. Teachers walked around the rooms talking to students, encouraging them to work and ensuring that the work in hand was being completed. In certain classes Irish was required from students in their answers to questions. In other cases complete sentences were sought from students as opposed to individual words as answers to questions and this is a good practice as it gives them more practice on putting sentences in Irish together. It is recommended that pronunciation and accuracy errors be corrected more often in the classes. It is important to remind students how to say and pronounce sentences and phrases correctly as their competence in this area increases their self-confidence.

On the whole, students were well-mannered and courteous in the classes observed. It was clear that there was a good interaction between teachers and students and students making honest efforts were continuously praised. A ticket system was in operation in one class where prizes are available for students who make an effort and this approach is commended. There were challenging students in certain classes and it was difficult to stimulate them to work. Teachers dealt with them patiently and great efforts were made to encourage them to participate in the classes. It would be worth considering, and discussing continuously, devices to encourage these students to work so that they do not interfere with other students who have a desire to learn.

ASSESSMENT

House examinations are organised at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent home to parents after these examinations. Reports are sent home three times a year for the classes undertaking certificate examinations. It was reported that communications skills in Irish are formally assessed for the students in sixth year before the oral examination. This approach is commended but it is recommended that the communications skills of all the students in the school be assessed formally from first year onwards. It is important for students to understand the importance of this aspect of learning the language from the first day.

It was clear from the copybooks observed that homework is assigned to students and that it is corrected regularly. There was quite a lot of work to be seen in some of the copybooks observed but it was clear from other copybooks that it is difficult to persuade students to do their work at home thoroughly. In one case observed class guidelines were written in Irish at the beginning of the students’ copybooks. It is recommended that the class guidelines and the management language which lets students communicate in the class in the target language, from giving excuses to seeking explanations, be displayed on the walls of the classrooms. As well as that a printed page with the terms and phrases could be distributed to students which they could use in class to communicate with the teacher through Irish.
The achievement in the state examinations at the three levels is satisfactory enough but it is felt that more students could choose a higher level in the examinations than has happened in recent years. The school management and the Irish teachers are advised to look in particular at the small number of students who take higher level papers in the state examinations, especially in the Leaving Certificate.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There was careful planning for all the classes observed and worksheets and notes were prepared for distribution to students in the classes.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and contact was very good indeed in some classes observed. The teachers are commended for their commitment to the use of the target language in certain classes.
- Speaking opportunities in the target language were given to students in certain classes through the use of devices such as pair work and role-play.
- The manner in which ICT was used in one case observed was commended.
- Examples of best practice were observed in certain classes, for example writing development strategies, the use of postcards and the encouragement of talking among students.
- A certain amount of material relevant to the teaching and learning of the language and to students’ work was displayed on classroom walls.

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

- The school management is advised to see if some changes could be made to the timetable as regards the junior cycle and the Transition Year.
- It is recommended that an extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme be put together to assist the efforts of the teachers in the classrooms and to give students experience of Irish as a living language.
- It is recommended that the plan for teaching and learning of Irish in the school be developed further and that it be ensured that there are practical and contemporary aspects of learning Irish in the Transition Year programme.
- It is recommended that use be made of a wider range of materials in the Irish classes which will aid contemporary contextualising of the course material for the students.
- It is recommended that the students be given the opportunity to develop all the language skills in each Irish class and that an entire class period not be spent on one aspect of learning the language.
- It is recommended that the students’ communications skills be assessed formally from first year onwards.
- It is recommended that the question of the small number of students taking the higher level Irish paper for the Leaving Certificate be investigated in order to increase it over time.

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

*Published March 2011*
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The school management and members of the Irish Department in St. Brendan’s College, welcome the report of the Irish inspector. We are very happy with the many positive comments and commendations contained in the report and feel that the report reflects fairly the huge effort and work put into the teaching of Irish by the teaching team involved. We welcome the comments and recommendations at the end of the report. Some of these have already been discussed by the Principal with the teachers concerned and the rest will be taken on board during future subject planning sessions.

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

A recent meeting of the Board of Studies has looked at how the timetable can be re-organised to facilitate additional class contact time for Irish while balancing this against the needs of other subject areas. The teachers of Irish have been asked to come up with some ideas in relation to extra-curricular and cross-curricular links within the teaching of Irish. Since the inspection, interactive projectors and notebooks have been installed in all classrooms along with internet access and relevant software. It is envisaged that these and additional resources such as our subscription to Foinse will “aid contemporary contextualising of the course material for the students”. Specific recommendations relating to the teaching of the language and the structure of class work will be taken on board by the individual teachers. As a school we will continue to promote and encourage all students where feasible to study their subjects at higher level. It is also intended to convey to parents and students each year the benefits of a period on an Irish language course.