Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuiire
Ballygar
County Galway
Roll number: 62900M

Date of inspection: 5 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Ballygar, Co. Galway. 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 in the course of 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Good provision is made for the teaching and learning of Irish in the various programmes. There are four class periods per week in the Junior Cycle and six class-periods per week in the Senior Cycle. The number of class-groups in the different year-groups is satisfactory in terms of the average number of students in each group, particularly in the junior class-groups. First-year and Transition-Year students are grouped on a mixed-ability basis. The students are streamed at the end of first year and the remaining year-groups in the school are organised according to the levels in the state examinations. These class groups are timetabled concurrently. The management is congratulated on this student-centred provision, because it affords the student the opportunity to choose the class which best suits her/his needs. Students who are transferring from one level to a more appropriate level are well-managed by the school, which requires a note of approval from parents or guardians, as well as advice from the subject-teacher and the management. These are praiseworthy approaches. It is customary for the teachers in the department to give students every encouragement to remain at the highest level for as long as possible in the cycles, according to their ability and their wishes. The management makes every effort to ensure continuity by assigning the same teacher to each group of students throughout a cycle.

All teachers who teach Irish in mainstream classes are graduates in Irish. It is praiseworthy that the vast majority of teachers are teaching in both cycles and at the different examination-levels, an approach which means that the majority of teachers in the department have appropriate experience of teaching the subject from first year through to the Leaving Certificate class. The management gives every encouragement and support to the staff to attend continuous professional training. Representatives of the Irish department have attended inservice workshops run by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish over the past few years. It is recommended that the feedback sessions following SLSS inservice days be formally conducted, to ensure that every member of staff is informed about the recommendations made at the courses. It is recommended that of copy of the inservice workshops should be included in the plan for Irish, as a reference point when the department is engaging in collaborative planning for teaching and learning.
Fourteen per cent of the school’s enrolment have exemptions from the study of Irish; 22 of these students have identified learning difficulties and another 10 were educated outside the state. School management makes every effort to identify students with ‘unofficial exemptions’. However there are some students without an official exemption from Irish. It is recommended that a question about an official exemption from the study of Irish be included in the school application form.

All the teachers of Irish have their own rooms with good ICT resources in the rooms and there is access to the internet in the classrooms as well as some data-projectors which the school management has provided recently. There is ready access to television sets, compact discs, multi-purpose digital discs and overhead projectors. There are computer rooms available on a booking basis. The department of Irish is now advised to analyse their strengths and weaknesses regarding the use of ICT in the classroom. A step-by-step plan can be devised to cope with any deficiencies identified, in order to develop the integration of ICT for students learning Irish, an experience closely allied to their understanding of life. There is no specific budget for Irish, but the school management is very well disposed towards Irish. It is recommended that an inventory be drawn up and that a collection of resources for Irish be systematically compiled which would support the teaching and learning of the language. The SLSS website and the website www.cogg.ie will be very useful as reference-points for this project.

There has been a strong tradition of Irish language and culture in the school since its foundation. Ballygar was once a breac-Ghaeltacht area. The teachers promote respect and love for this tradition among the students by organising a range of co-curricular and extra-curricular events. There is a noteworthy emphasis on traditional music in the programme followed as part of the optional aspects of Music in the State examinations. Seachtain na Gaeilge is celebrated every year; céilís, quizzes and poster competitions are organised for this week. Students are brought to attend plays in the Taibhdhearc theatre in Galway. Efforts are also made to use Irish as far as possible, at whole-school events.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

This school has been involved in the school development planning process on a formal basis for some years now. The teachers meet formally three times a year. A record of these meetings is maintained. The plan for Irish, however, contained minutes of the last two meetings only. It is recommended that minutes of all meetings be kept as part of the plan for Irish, as a record of the work of the department. A subject co-ordinator for the department has been appointed and this appointment is regularly rotated, which ensures that all staff-members acquire the leadership skills involved in the co-ordinator’s role.

The department needs to engage in collaborative planning process for the language. There is a very short account of the practices and approaches of the department in the plan. It is recommended that this section of the plan be revised to ensure that all aspects of the organisation of the department are part of the plan for Irish. The department has developed aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of Irish and the objectives have been formulated as learning targets for the students, spanning the four main language skills. These objectives should provide a framework for the planning for teaching and learning as well as for assessment.

Long-term plans for the presentation of the curriculum, laid out on a term-by-term basis, were submitted to the inspector for every year-group and for the various examination-levels. These plans are presented as lists of topics, general aspects of the syllabuses, or references to a chapter...
of a textbook. It is recommended that these general outlines be developed into comprehensive current documents, appropriate for the teaching and learning of the language. The following particulars should be included in these plans: the teaching topics, the methodologies, the resources and the assessment methods. It is also recommended that planning be done to teach the language thematically and in an integrated way across the various aspects of the syllabuses in accordance with the approach recommended in the Irish syllabuses. Examples of this integrated planning are given in Treoirlínte mar Thaca le Múineadh an Chúrsa Leasaithe Litriochaí (Guidelines to support the Teaching of the Revised Literature Course) from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2004). It is also given as a recommendation that the same programme of work be agreed for the first terms of both second and fifth years, for those students who change from higher to ordinary level.

Although there is no Transition Year this year, a programme for that year is included as part of the Irish department plan. It is recommended that this programme be reviewed in the context of the guidelines from the Department for Transition Year. The guidelines are available on the SLSS website for Transition Year at www.slss.ty.ie. It would be worth forging links with that heritage for the students during Transition Year.

To ensure the strategic development of the department of Irish, the department should devise an action plan. The recommendations in this report and the department’s priorities should be an integral part of this plan. A precise time-span should be set for the action plan, as well as nominating staff-members to implement these aims. It is recommended that the work of the department be regularly reviewed and a record of the outcome of such review be maintained in the department plan.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A good standard of short-term planning had been carried out for all the lessons observed, in that they were characterised by an ordered structure. In the case of the majority of the classes, the pace suited the students and the teaching and learning opportunities for all the students were achieved. A good link was forged with students’ previous learning and in the case of a poetry class observed, there was evidence that the course was being taught in an integrated way, because the poem was reinforcing students’ vocabulary. It is recommended that this kind of planning for teaching and learning be more widely used. Very good preparation had been done for some classes, in the form of PowerPoint slides with homework answers, visual stimuli for a feedback session on pair work and the substance of a poem. This preparatory work is praiseworthy.

In one class, poetry questions from examination-papers were the subject-matter of the class for ordinary-level students, while foundation-level students were working independently on other tasks. The foundation-level students were sitting in various places throughout the room. Although thorough work was done with the ordinary-level students, insufficient attention was paid to those taking foundation-level. It is recommended that the arrangement of seats for these students be reviewed and opportunities during class-time be planned to assess their work and progress. Lessons can be designed with different teaching and learning expectations to suit the two levels. Such differentiated approaches will improve the learning for both ordinary- and foundation-level students.

Teacher-student questioning was the main teaching and learning method throughout the evaluation. There was a reasonable variety in the level of questioning. All the teachers enhanced this approach by creating a variety of opportunities for group-work on an oral task, for individual
work on a written task and through the use of drama. In the lesson where students were working in pairs, the students didn’t understand what exactly they were expected to do, so they began to write on the sheet instead of using it to scaffold their conversation. It is recommended that the task be modelled for the students beforehand. No time-limit was set for the pair-task at the outset and although the teacher catered well for the needs of the pairs, the pair-work went on too long. In another lesson, no time-limit was agreed for an individual task on poetry and some students had completed the work before the teacher called time on the task. It is recommended that a time-limit for tasks be agreed with the students beforehand and that extended tasks be available for those who complete the core-task before the allocated time has elapsed. Finally, it is recommended that an opportunity be provided for all groups to present what they learned while completing the task, to the whole class, to acknowledge their efforts and to encourage all the students to participate in subsequent tasks. In some classes the drama-method was used to good advantage in teaching literature. This technique gave the students an opportunity to identify with the characters in the literature as well as practising their oral skills, both productive and receptive. The teachers are congratulated on these activity-based methodologies which ensure a balance between teacher input and student activities.

All teachers made clear orderly use of the whiteboard or of PowerPoint to illustrate the structure of a lesson, to correct homework, to record vocabulary and phrases which arose during the lessons, to provide the central point for homework or the essence of a poem for the students and to give them keywords to describe a novel, as a scaffold for an oral report on the novel. This is good practice because it is an example for the students of how to organise their own thoughts when preparing for a written task and this clarity and practice is a great help to weaker students. It is praiseworthy also that the students in one class were encouraged to self-correct their homework according to pre-prepared answers displayed on PowerPoint slides.

The teachers had their own rooms and all teachers had made effective use of this advantage. Proverbs, posters, grammar charts and visual illustrations of a novel were among the displays on classroom walls. The teachers are congratulated on providing a stimulating learning environment for their students. It is recommended that the department of Irish discuss the kind of vocabulary that students need to ask questions, to make a request, and to explain their difficulties in the target language, during Irish lessons. It would be helpful to display this specific vocabulary strategically on charts on the classroom walls and to change them regularly. Thus every year-group will build up useful vocabulary gradually, year by year.

Irish was the language used for every classroom transaction between teachers and students. In the majority of classes, the teachers simplified the Irish they used, which helped them to avoid overuse of translation. Wall posters were also used to clarify explanations. The students were encouraged to acquire additional vocabulary during all lessons. These are praiseworthy approaches. The students had good Irish and, in the majority of classes, they were afforded opportunities to express themselves.

There was effective classroom management, as well as a mutually-respectful enthusiastic learning atmosphere in all classes observed in the course of the inspection. The teachers knew their students well and this enhanced the learning and teaching encounter. The quality of students’ efforts and answers was always encouragingly affirmed.

**ASSESSMENT**

School management has developed a good whole-school assessment policy, in which satisfactory procedures for examinations and for homework are clearly set out. The students use a system of
homework diaries, as is appropriate. The class-teacher and the year-head manage the homework diaries and both the parents and teachers use the diaries as a means of communication. A random sample of students’ homework diaries was collected and it was evident from those in which homework tasks were recorded that homework was being regularly set. There was an emphasis on written work and memorising in the tasks set as homework. It is recommended that guidelines for homework in Irish be agreed within the framework of the whole-school assessment policy. These guidelines could be incorporated in the plan for Irish. The homework task should involve a selection from among all of the different language skills. This approach would reinforce the students’ competence in all the skills, rather than giving priority to one skill and provide an assessment experience for students in line with recommendations made above and as set out in the syllabuses for the teaching and learning of the language.

It was evident from the copybooks reviewed that a good range of work had been completed in line with the requirements of the syllabuses. There was continuity and developmental work in them also. Mechanical corrections of grammar and spelling mistakes had been done in certain copybooks, but, in others, correction had been carried out which took ownership of the work from the student, such was the profusion of corrections in a single piece of writing. It is recommended that correction criteria be agreed with the students beforehand and that the work be corrected according to those criteria. A limited use only had been made of developmental corrections which give clear guidance on the strengths and weaknesses of the work, especially in the case of substantial pieces. It is recommended that the Irish department review this situation, in order to raise the learning of students from the correction process. The NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) website and the information on AfL (Assessment for Learning) at www.ncca.ie will be very useful for this.

Summative assessment of first-, second- and fifth-year students is carried out twice during the school year. Certificate students have examinations at Christmas and trial examinations in the springtime. Reports are sent to the students’ homes based on these assessments. As the main language skills are included in these assessments, it is recommended that the parents or guardians be informed of the students’ achievements across all the language skills in the reports sent home, or at the annual parent-teacher meeting. Two other reports are sent home, in November and again in March, specifically concerning students’ homework, class work and behaviour. This is praiseworthy practice. The inspector understood from a document offered for perusal, that common assessment is not carried out. It is recommended that the department of Irish reconsider the advantages of setting common examinations for students.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Good support has been provided for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school.
- The short-term planning carried out for all lessons observed was of a good standard, and preparatory work was very good.
- Good techniques characterised the teaching and learning methodologies employed by all teachers, including activity-based methodologies.
- The Irish department uses good systems for assessment and homework.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The department is advised to engage in a collaborative planning process that would develop up-to-date plans for all year groups, for teaching the subject thematically and in an integrated way. To ensure the strategic development of the department, it is recommended that a plan of action be designed and regularly reviewed.
• The discussion and sharing of effective teaching and learning methods among the teachers of Irish in the school would be of great benefit to all.
• It is recommended that the department discuss the advantages to students’ learning of including all language skills in homework tasks, of common examinations, and of developmental correction.

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

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