

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Meán Scoil an Chlochair
Kilbeggan, County Westmeath
Roll number: 63221U**

Date of inspection: 10 February 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Meán Scoil an Chlochair, Kilbeggan. 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. 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

A whole-school evaluation was conducted in Meán Scoil an Chlochair, Kilbeggan in 2006.

There is a very good level of provision and support for Irish in the school. The Irish teaching team comprises four teachers all of who have Irish to degree level. Their proficiency in spoken Irish is satisfactory for the purpose of teaching. The teachers are afforded opportunities to teach Irish in the various programmes and at the various levels provided by the school. It is an essential part of their continuing professional development that they have experience of implementing the various syllabuses, and management is commended for this approach

There are three class groups in each year of the junior cycle and in fifth year, and there are four class groups in sixth year. In keeping with good practice, first year class groups are of mixed ability. Classes are set for the other year groups in the certificate programmes and the classes are timetabled concurrently. This approach facilitates the students' access to the subject at a level which is appropriate to their needs. There are two mixed-ability class groups in Transition Year (TY), an arrangement which is appropriate to the programme's philosophy.

The level of provision for Irish in the school's timetable is good. It is very good in senior cycle where there are four class periods per week in TY, a programme which is optional, and five class periods per week in first and second year of the established Leaving Certificate. Each year group in junior cycle has four class periods per week. The management and the teachers of Irish are encouraged to consider the advantage that would accrue to the students as a result of having an extra class period allocated in junior cycle, a matter which would assist in providing greater equity in the amount of language input received by a greater number of students before they embark on the Leaving Certificate. The students in each year group have one class period of Irish daily as recommended.

Management supports the teachers to avail of opportunities for professional development. Evidence was provided that the teachers of Irish had attended various workshops provided by the Second Level Support Service for Irish in recent years. In addition, management has invited speakers to provide input on a whole-school basis on a wide range of themes such as positive behaviour, music and learning, special educational needs in mainstream, teaching mixed-ability classes and differentiation.

It was stated that eight per cent of the enrolment had an exemption from the study of Irish. The management makes every effort to timetable appropriate support classes simultaneously with Irish classes for the students who are entitled to the exemption. It was reported that a small number of students who have been granted an exemption, are studying Irish. It is important that all students would be able to avail of inputs in Irish language and culture.

A good range of activities is organised which provides students with opportunities to imbibe and practise the culture and language outside formal Irish classes. Shortly before the evaluation, the students had participated in a *Feachtas* table quiz and plans were afoot to bring second-year students to the Aran Islands. In addition, various activities are organised to celebrate *Seachtain na Gaeilge* (Irish Week). As part of the preparations for these activities, it is recommended that the possibilities of bringing different year groups together be considered, so that opportunities could be created for the students to meet with students outside their own class group in the context of the language and culture. The responsibility being given to TY students for teaching dancing to first-year students in preparation for a *céilí* which takes place during *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is especially commended. This could be extended, and more responsibility could be assigned to TY students for organising different activities as part of that year's programme.

There is a very good supply of aids and resources for Irish in the school. Included are various audio-visual resources as well as the availability of the school's computer rooms. There is broadband access in every classroom, and in addition there is a permanent data projector in many classrooms. A laptop computer is available for teachers and they also have access to a computer in the teachers' work room. The majority of teachers are based in their own classrooms, and storage space for resources is available in these rooms.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish department has been established in accordance with the recommendation in the WSE report to put subject departments on a formal footing. One of the Irish teachers in turn fulfils the role of coordinator. The coordinator accepts this role for a two-year period. The approach to the coordination and the period in question are commendable. The coordinator convenes meetings once a term, arranges the agenda, records the minutes and manages the budget. It is recommended that methodologies and teaching and learning strategies be included on the agenda for meetings on a regular basis. With the aim of developing various aspects across the curriculum, it is also recommended that meetings of those engaged in the teaching of languages be convened from time-to-time

The Irish plan indicated that good progress has been made in developing the document. It is commendable that content has been set out per term, and that the teachers prepare a common plan for first-year classes. In this regard the two teachers working with TY develop different modules to be taught, and they exchange classes midway through the year. It was clear from the plans that poetry and songs outside the demands of examinations are used to support the students' learning. This is very good practice.

The team should remember that development planning is an ongoing process. With regard to the short-term planning for the subject itself, it is recommended that it be guided more by the syllabuses and the language learning needs of the students than by mere topic titles. In order to guide the work that needs to be done in this area, it is recommended that the template be further developed to include the language functions and the expected learning outcomes, the teaching and learning methodologies and strategies, including the modes of assessment to be employed to achieve the learning outcomes, and the aids and the resources. It is recommended that special emphasis be placed on the development of students' awareness of language syntax and that work already done on integrating aspects of grammar and subject content be used as a basis for this work. Emphasis should be placed on effective methods to differentiate the learning at the planning stage, to ensure, in accordance with the high expectations teachers have of students, that there would always be appropriate challenge in students' learning.

It is clear that the recommendation made in the WSE report regarding the use of available resources in subject planning in the school was acted on. Good progress is being made in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a medium through which the teachers can develop and share resources, and a dedicated folder is available to the Irish teachers on the school's computer system. Members of the department recognise that this has great possibilities, and it is recommended that effective use be made of ICT as a tool for learning. In the interest of sharing the current good teaching and learning practices of the teachers in the department, it is recommended that they visit each other's classes and engage in peer observation. In addition, it is recommended that they explore the possibilities of engaging in team teaching on occasion.

Very good planning and preparation was carried out for the individual classes observed. Authentic material, work sheets, song sheets and *PowerPoint* slides were available, as well as a series of pictures prepared for students to be put in sequence based on a piece of literature. There was creativity in the preparation work done in the majority of instances to make the material appropriate to the students and to assist them in identifying with it. In the minority of instances, the amount of time allocated to the different classes should be factored in at the planning and preparation stage to avoid the inclusion of excessive material.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in Irish was good. The roll was called and replied to in Irish at the beginning of each class as recommended. This practice was used cleverly in one instance to provide an opportunity to the students to include in their response phrases which they had learned on a particular theme. In accordance with best practice, Irish was used in all classes as the language of communication and instruction. It was clear in one instance, however, that this was not the usual student experience.

There was good continuity between the lessons observed and those preceding them. The students were made aware of the learning objectives at the commencement of all classes. The practice observed in half the classes whereby the students were made aware of what they would learn or the language functions they would have practised by the end of class, is highly commended. This practice should be extended and linked to the references made to learning outcomes in the section of this report pertaining to planning and preparation. It would help provide students with a better understanding of their learning and their development as independent learners. It was reported in one instance that students' capacity to reflect on their learning was being developed. This is very good practice and the opportunity should be taken to implement it in every class. Homework and

prior learning were checked at the outset of the classes. It was undertaken in a very creative and in a very good manner by using pictures for example on *PowerPoint*, on overhead projector, printed or with the help of a map.

Effective use was made of a suitable range of methodologies and teaching and learning strategies which created opportunities for the students to be active in their learning in the majority of classes. Some examples of well-organised pair work and group work were observed. Their use was successful in those instances where the various members had a definite role, and where these were made known to them before the commencement of the task, where the task was clear, where the task was time bound and adhered to, and where feedback was sought. The instance in which the students were required to engage in role play when giving feedback and where the teacher noted the feedback on the whiteboard was particularly praiseworthy. The use of drama as a strategy should be extended. In one instance it is recommended that better use be made of the opportunities created by such tasks to differentiate the learning.

Worthwhile efforts were made in the classes observed to develop real communicative situations for the tasks and to help the students identify with the material being discussed. This is very good practice. Very good approaches were observed in the teaching of literature. Aids and authentic resources were used very effectively to help students identify with the material. Clever use was made of the overhead projector to present the text of a poem to the students, and they were asked to identify the words which they recognised in the text. In another instance, a picture of a film star was used to discuss the story, emotions and images of the poem. Very good work was also done to associate the content of a poem with the students' own experiences, and the manner in which they were asked to share their own feelings and opinions, and the use of images to stimulate discussions for this purpose are particularly praiseworthy. As happened in a few instances, opportunities to develop students' language awareness should be taken when working on literature, reading comprehension or audio texts.

It was clear in all the lessons that the teachers had high expectations of their students. In the vast majority of instances the students were active in their learning. In the observation and interaction with them, they displayed satisfactory progress in their learning in the majority of instances, and some students displayed very good proficiency in the language. In a minority of classes it is recommended that more Irish should be spoken by the students themselves.

ASSESSMENT

The Irish teachers implement the school's homework policy. The policy includes sufficient scope to cover the development needs of the various language skills. As was evident from the classroom practice and the samples of students' work observed, homework is assigned and corrected regularly. There was variety in the correction practice. Best practice obtained in the minority of classes, where in addition to a grade or marks and affirmation, recognition was given to students for what was done well or correctly, where gaps in the learning were identified, and where guidance was given on ways to improve the work. It is recommended that the Irish department takes advantage of its current experience of Assessment for Learning and that a practice be agreed regarding the type of corrections used on students' work. Further guidance on what is involved is available at www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl.

At the time of the evaluation the school did not have a written policy on evaluation. It was stated that a variety of assessment modes is used in addition to the homework. It was evident, however, that the teachers did not have an agreed approach concerning the various modes with the

exception of homework, written examinations, and the audio comprehension being corrected by the teacher. Best practice regarding the assessment of the learning of Irish exists in those instances where all the language skills are taken into consideration in the assessment and in the results sent home. The practice whereby recognition is given to students' achievement in all the main language skills to be developed should be the general practice in the case of each year group. In accordance with the earlier recommendation regarding expected learning outcomes, they should be used as criteria for assessment and shared with the students. This would support self-evaluation and peer evaluation. It was reported in one instance that students are asked to reflect on what they have learned at the end of a lesson and to record it. This very good practice should be extended.

In keeping with planning for first year, a common examination is set at the end of the school year. In the case of these classes, the Christmas results are based on continuous assessment which is class based. With a view to monitoring the students' progress more carefully during the year, it is recommended that common examinations be used at different stages. This would afford an opportunity to effectively monitor the implementation of the plan, and to make adjustments at appropriate times as required. A similar approach should be adopted in relation to the plans for all year groups.

As regards TY, the modes of assessment are in accordance with the programme. It is recommended from the point of view of language learning that the Irish department considers how the students could use the *European Language Portfolio* as an instrument to assist them in developing their skills as self-directed learners, identify learning targets, monitor their learning, and assist them in developing their awareness of themselves as language learners. Additional information is available at www.tcd.ie/slscs/clcs/research/featuredresearch_european_language_portfolio and on the Council of Europe website at www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/.

The teachers maintain very good records of students' achievement, and there was evidence in the records that evaluation was being conducted on spoken Irish in some instances. Management analyses student achievement in the certificate examinations and comparison is made with national norms. This is good practice. The majority of students in both cycles study Irish at ordinary level. Increasing the number of students taking higher level in both cycles is a recognised aim of both management and the teachers of Irish. This aim, which indicates the team's and managements' determination to promote learning, is commendable.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a very good level of provision and support for Irish in the school, and the teachers have high expectations for the students.
- The Irish department is formally established, and the Irish teachers in turn accept the role of coordinator for a two-year period.
- Good progress has been made in the development of the subject plan, and in the use of the school's aids and resources including ICT in the teaching and learning of the subject.
- There was a good standard in the teaching and learning of Irish. Irish was being used in all classes as the language of communication and the teaching medium.

- Effective use was made of a suitable range of methodologies and teaching and learning strategies, which created opportunities for the students to be active in their own learning in the majority of classes.
- A variety of evaluation methods is used, and the teachers maintain very good records of the students' achievement.

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

- It is recommended that the subject's short-term plans for the various year groups be developed in line with the guidelines included in this report.
- It is recommended that methodologies and teaching and learning strategies be included on the agenda for meetings convened by the Irish department from time-to-time, that teachers would engage in peer review and team teaching.
- It is recommended that the Irish department make use of its current experience in Assessment for Learning, and agree practice regarding the type of correction used on students' work.
- It is recommended that it be common assessment practice to recognise students' achievement in the main language skills to be developed in the case of all year groups.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.