

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Rice College
Westport, County Mayo
Roll number: 647000**

Date of inspection: 23 November 2009



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rice College as part of a whole school evaluation (WSE). 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Timetabled provision for teaching and learning Irish in the school is satisfactory. There is a weekly allocation of four single class periods in junior cycle and five single class periods in senior cycle. A review of current provision is recommended to ensure that junior cycle students, in particular third-year students, have daily class contact with the subject. Students in Transition Year (TY) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) classes are allocated three periods per week. The number of class groups in the different year groups is satisfactory regarding the average number of students in each group. Management is commended for carrying out an annual review of this provision. Classes in first year and in TY are of mixed ability and students in other year groups are arranged according to levels in the certificate examinations. These classes are concurrently timetabled which facilitates movement between the different examination levels, as appropriate. Every encouragement is given to students to undertake higher level for as long as possible throughout courses. Procedures are well managed for students who wish to change to a more appropriate level. In such cases written or verbal permission is sought from parents or guardians, in addition to advice from the subject teachers. These practices are commended.

All teachers involved in teaching Irish are graduates in the subject. It is to be commended that the vast majority teach both junior and senior cycle classes and at the different examination levels, an arrangement which ensures that teachers in the Irish department have, and will continue to have, appropriate experience of teaching the subject from first year through to Leaving Certificate. In addition, teachers are given the opportunity to teach on the different programmes offered by the school. Management gives every encouragement and support to the entire team to attend continuing professional training. It is to be commended that representatives from the Irish department have been attending in-service courses provided by the Second Level Support Services (SLSS) for some time now. Recently, school-based in service training on the differentiated teaching and learning approaches was provided for the whole teaching staff. This course was provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS). This initiative is commended. Members of the team have experience as assistant examiners for the oral and written examinations for the State Examinations Commission (SEC). It is recommended that the support

materials distributed at the SLSS and SESS courses be included in the planning folder as a reference point for the team during collaborative planning for teaching and learning,

Almost all teachers of Irish have individual assigned classrooms. A comprehensive range of information and communication technology (ICT) resources and broadband are accessible throughout the school. Many of the classrooms have a data projector and two mobile data projectors are also available. There is easy access to television sets, CDs, DVDs and overhead projectors. The computer room is available on a booking system. It is recommended that an analysis be carried out on the strengths of the use of ICT resources in the classroom and how this area could be improved. A plan should be developed incrementally to cater for these needs in order to provide students with experience of ICT in Irish, experiences which relate closely to their understanding of the world. The school library contains a section with books in the Irish language; this section needs to be renewed. When the library is being updated it is recommended that the SLSS website and the website www.cogg.ie be used as reference points. A list could be compiled and a collection of resources for Irish built up systematically to support teaching and learning in the language.

A total of 6.7% of all students have an exemption from Irish. Twenty-nine percent of these students have recognised learning difficulties and another sixty-five percent obtained their early education outside the State. Six percent of students are in the process of obtaining an exemption or did not have clear evidence of why they were entitled to an exemption. Even though school management makes every effort to be vigilant as regards 'unofficial exemptions', there are students in the school who do not study the subject but who have no official exemption from Irish. In an effort to avoid this situation in the future the school has included a question regarding exemption from Irish this year on the entrance form for students. This development is commended. It is recommended that any misconceptions that students in any year groups may have regarding exemption from Irish should be clarified before the end of the current school year.

Teachers of Irish make every effort to enhance the status of Irish and promote Irish culture among students and all other partners in the school. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is organised every year and activities such as a quiz and an art competition are included in the celebrations. It is recommended that the school consults the *Conradh na Gaeilge* website at www.snag.ie when further developing *Seachtain na Gaeilge* activities in the future. In-school debates are organised and every encouragement is given to students to spend time in the Gaeltacht area. Teachers are to be congratulated on writing articles for the school newsletter regarding the major events in which student participate relevant to Irish and Irish culture. The school is highly commended for developing such practices, as all these activities raise the status of the language among all partners in the school. During the evaluation a number of recommendations were made concerning the role of students, especially TY students, in the development of the whole-school status of Irish.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish department has engaged in the school development planning (SDP) process on a formal basis for a number of years. A record of meetings is maintained. It is recommended that these minutes be incorporated as part of the subject plan for Irish, as a record of the department's work. To support formal communication, teachers also meet informally on a regular basis. A subject co-ordinator has been selected for the department and the position rotates every two years. This good practice is commended as the two-year period provides continuity from the point of view of planning objectives and this arrangement will gradually ensure that all members of the team will

acquire the leadership skills which develop from the role of co-ordinator. The work completed in the Irish plan on practices and approaches used in teaching and learning Irish is commended. The team is congratulated on the links established with the other subject departments in the school. In relation to cross-curricular links, it would be beneficial to create links with the other languages being taught in the school to facilitate discussion and exchange of effective teaching and learning methodologies among language teachers. It is an advantage that two of the teachers of Irish also teach other languages as a second language in the school. Such a link would greatly help to foster a whole-school learning experience of languages, a development which would enhance both teaching and learning.

A framework has been outlined for all year groups for teaching and learning the language, which contains the chapter numbers or the amount of literature being taught each term. A short summary of a teaching and learning module for the LCA is also included. This is followed by a brief description of department practices in relation to the four language skills, assessment and homework. This information is very limited. It is recommended that curricular plans be developed, based on this framework, for the different year groups and for LCA and that the learning objectives, timeframes, methodologies, resources and assessment methods be detailed in each plan. In this way, planning for teaching the language thematically will be facilitated in an integrated manner over the different aspects of the syllabuses, in keeping with recommendations in the Irish syllabuses. Samples of this type of integrated planning are available in '*Treoirlínte mar thaca le Múineadh an Chúrsa Leasaithe Litríochta*' (Guidelines to Support the Teaching of the Revised Literature Course) published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Collaborative planning on a continuing basis is recommended in order to agree a common programme of work for the first term in second and fifth years to facilitate students who change from higher to ordinary level.

A specific programme has been devised for Irish in TY and the team of Irish teachers is to be congratulated for designing different aims and objectives for teaching and learning the language during this year. In the interests of further developing this plan a review is recommended. This work should also set additional aims and objectives which reflect the basic national objectives of TY, recommended by the Department of Education and Science in the guidelines *Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools* or accessible at www.slss.ie/transitionyear. In this way planning will take place which will provide a different learning experience for this year's students. It is also suggested that the details of the curriculum plans, as recommended above, be used as a guide when plans are being devised for implementing the curriculum during this year. It would be beneficial for teaching and learning to translate to Irish the instruments for assessment and review available on this site. This development would enhance the level of assessment in the language and the programme of study for Irish in TY would include input from students.

It is recommended that an action plan be drafted to ensure the strategic development of the department. It is further recommended that priorities include: the strengthening of the whole-school status of the language; development of the library; further integration of ICT in teaching and learning the language as well as the above recommendations concerning curricular planning. In order to achieve these objectives it is recommended that a period of time be determined for the action plan, in addition to nominating members of the team to lead the attainment of the objectives.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers' individual planning and short term preparation were of a good standard in all cases. In certain classes the work and the research evident in the class notes being used were of a high standard. In general, lessons were well structured and paced. However, limited use was made of ICT in the learning aids prepared by teachers to scaffold learning in the classes. The majority of teachers shared the learning objectives, either verbally or written on the board, with students at the beginning of lessons, and again as the learning segments changed. These teachers are commended for their diligence. It is recommended that a debriefing session be held with students at the end of the lesson to identify what learning has been achieved as independence is fostered in learners when they have to identify their own learning outcomes.

Good use was made of the thematic approach where an essay and a segment from a tape, a podcast of an autobiography and a reading comprehension and a poem and a letter were integrated during lessons. This approach is commended because student proficiency is developed across all the skills and it provides variety in lessons in response to the range of learning styles in every class. In the interests of developing this good practice it is recommended that the acquisition of a new skill should not be undertaken without prior preparation being done on the written or oral vocabulary. It is recommended also that answers from tape work be recorded and students should be encouraged to note the correct form. In those classes where use was made of individual or group work, teachers moved around the classroom responding to the needs of the students, as appropriate. It is recommended that this approach be used for all tasks, including listening comprehension tasks. In certain classes a PowerPoint presentation was used to teach prescribed literature. It was evident that students were engaged by the visual stimuli and the clarity of the well-structured presentations given by the teacher in these two cases. These teaching and learning techniques are highly commended and it is recommended that they be shared with all team members.

In a large majority of lessons effective use was made of questioning to encourage students to participate in the lessons. As an alternative approach to the interaction between students and teacher, it is recommended that students be afforded an opportunity to engage in a more active way in part of the lesson. For example, individual or group work, according to proficiency, should be organised or, peer learning be facilitated. In this way teacher-talk will lessen and students will have the opportunity to work together on their receptive and language production skills.

Three general recommendations are made in relation to particular classes where use was made of group work. Every member of the group must have a clear role and a definite period of time must be determined in advance for the completion of the task. In one instance the teacher reminded students of the amount of time left in the lesson. However, in the other lesson no time limit was set for the task and this adversely affected the pace of the lesson. The context of both of these lessons was mixed-ability classes and it is recommended that differentiated learning expectations be included for the different groups by having supplementary tasks available for those students who complete the core task before the time allocated. Finally, it is recommended that all groups be given an opportunity to present in front of the class the learning achieved during the completion of the task so that their efforts may receive recognition and as encouragement for all students to participate in the next group task.

All teachers made clear, well-organised use of the whiteboard or of PowerPoint to write down new vocabulary or speech idioms, clarify spellings, emphasise points of grammar and to demonstrate the structure of the lesson. This is good practice as it offers students exemplars of

how to order their own thoughts when they are preparing for a written task. This clarity and custom is especially helpful to students who are less proficient. In one lesson the words to be learned by students were grouped together on the board. This approach is highly commended, as it facilitates learning on a deeper level rather than giving unrelated vocabulary to students to learn.

Teachers with designated classrooms had made good efforts to provide a stimulating learning environment for students through the use of charts and posters showing vocabulary from different aspects of the courses. In general, Irish was the language of communication between teachers and students. The vast majority of teachers used simplified Irish which avoided excessive use of translation. This approach is commended. In classes where English was used to explain vocabulary or tasks, it is recommended that teachers be vigilant about which is the predominant language in the lesson and that full sentences in English are not used in any Irish class. In the same way, only the target language should be in use during Irish lessons in the different year groups to ask questions, make requests, and explain difficulties or for statements by the teacher. It would be very beneficial to display this classroom specific vocabulary on charts strategically on the walls; these charts should be changed regularly. In this manner a useful vocabulary will be learned gradually by each year group on a yearly basis. A good start has been made already on this approach in some classrooms and it is recommended that teachers build on this as a department.

In the majority of classes visited in the course of the evaluation, effective classroom management skills, as well as a learning atmosphere of mutual respect and diligence, were evident. In general, teachers had very good knowledge of the students in their care which added greatly to the teaching and learning encounter. Student always received affirmation and encouragement for their efforts and responses.

ASSESSMENT

All students are given two summative assessments: every student sits house examinations at Christmas time; in the spring mock examinations are organised for those taking the certificate examinations and end of year examinations are held for those not doing state examinations. It was reported that the summative examinations are common within year groups and that the four main language skills are incorporated. These practices are highly commended. Based on the results of these examinations two reports are sent home each year.

Formative assessment is carried out on a formal and an informal basis. Students are examined regularly on different aspects of the courses and a systematic record is maintained of results achieved. Included in the informal methods observed in the course of the evaluation visit were: correction of homework, oral questioning, individual work on worksheets, exercises from the textbook as well as pair work.

A homework diary system operates for all students in the school, as is appropriate. Diaries are monitored on a weekly basis by both class teachers and parents or guardians and are used frequently as a means of communication between teachers and parents. These practices are highly commended. Review of a random sample of diaries showed that homework was being assigned regularly but much emphasis was being placed on writing and memorising. It was reported in one class that preparation of tape work is assigned as homework. This practice of including variety across all the language skills in homework tasks is commended. The extended use of this practice is recommended as it reinforces student proficiency in all the skills instead of prioritising any one

skill. The school has developed a good homework policy which clearly sets out the role of all the partners regarding homework. It is recommended that variety across the four skills would be specified in the policy as a guide for teaching languages. In this way, the Irish department can develop practices for homework within a whole-school framework. It is also to be commended that homework was recorded in Irish or bilingually in certain diaries. Teachers who take the opportunity of recording homework as a source for teaching and learning are commended.

A random sample of copybooks was examined in every class observed during the evaluation visit. In the vast majority of the copybooks sufficient work had been completed and showed a good level of development. It would be advisable to cover a certain amount of work in an incremental manner in each term for every year group. In general courses were not being taught in a thematic, integrated manner. The result of this approach showed that one particular aspect of the course featured week after week in copybooks and folders. A review of the tedium attached to this practice is recommended. Various practices are in use within the Irish department in relation to assessing student progress in homework exercises. Some copybooks were monitored by writing the date and in places, mistakes made by students were circled. This form of correction is not sufficient to guide students in their learning, especially in the case of substantial pieces of writing. In one case it was customary for the teacher to write an explanation of the grammar rule that the student had contravened beside the grammatical mistakes and clear advice for learning was given as well. This good practice is highly commended and it is recommended that discussion on developmental corrections be initiated within the Irish department with the guidelines on assessment for learning, accessible on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie, used as a reference point for this initiative. It was stated that corrections are used as a diagnostic instrument to determine the most common mistakes and a class is taught based on this analysis. This technique is to be commended and, as an alternative approach, it is recommended that the mistakes be noted on a worksheet and that this be used for pair work in order to raise student awareness of the correct forms. One member of the team is commended for fostering organisational skills in the recording of learning by methodically keeping the different sections of the courses in different copybooks or folders.

Some copybooks also had long passages of English and a review of the amount of the mother language used in acquiring Irish is recommended.

The analysis carried out by management on the results achieved by students in the certificate examinations is to be commended. It is recommended that the Irish department make comparisons between these results and the national norms on a yearly basis. The numbers of students undertaking higher level in the certificate examinations in both cycles should also be examined. In this way the department would be in a position to plan strategies which would raise the level of student achievement.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Satisfactory timetabled allocation is provided for teaching and learning Irish.
- Comprehensive ICT resources and facilities are available in the school.
- In the majority of cases teacher planning and short term preparation were of a high standard. There was a good level of work and research evident in the class notes used by teachers in certain classes.

- Effective teaching and learning methodologies were used in the majority of lessons observed during the evaluation visit.
- Very good systems for summative assessment operate in the school and a worthwhile whole school homework policy has been developed.

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

- It is recommended that any lack of clarity that exists concerning exemptions from Irish for any student in any year group should be clarified before the end of this school year.
- It is recommended that links be established with the other languages being taught in the school to facilitate discussion and exchange of effective teaching methodologies among language teachers.
- The drafting of an action plan to guide the strategic development of the Irish department is recommended. It is also recommended that curricular plans be developed for each year group.
- It is recommended that the effective teaching and learning methodologies already in use in the department be shared with every member of the team.
- It is advisable that some teachers review the use made of the translation method in lessons and in copybooks in the teaching and learning of Irish.
- Wider use by all teachers of the practice of incorporating variety across the language skills into homework tasks as well as developmental corrections is recommended, especially in the case of substantial pieces of writing.

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