Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Bhríde, Carnew,
Co. Wicklow
Roll Number: 70790E

Date of inspection: 3 November 2009
REPORT ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Bhríde, Carnew. 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 acting principal and to the acting deputy 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

On entry to the school, first-year students are divided into ordinary and higher-level classes for Irish in Coláiste Bhríde. The division of class groups and allocation of students is based on the results of assessment examinations which the students undergo in the core subjects before coming to the school. The six Irish class groups are divided into two bands with one higher-level class group and two ordinary-level class groups in each band. That arrangement continues in second and third year. It was reported that there is flexibility in relation to this arrangement which allows students to move between levels, as required. It is recommended that senior management review this practice for the future. Students should be assigned to mixed-ability class groups for first year at least.

All class groups in the junior cycle have four periods per week for Irish. There are four periods per week available in Transition Year (TY) for Irish and five periods per week for all class groups in the senior cycle. The provision for Irish on the timetable is very satisfactory in the senior cycle but the school management are advised to look at the possibilities of providing an additional period for at least one of the year groups in the junior cycle.

There are five teachers teaching Irish in the school. Four teachers have appropriate qualifications for teaching Irish, with years of experience in addition. Another teacher takes one first-year class. There is a tradition in the school of assigning the higher-level Irish classes in the senior cycle to a senior teacher. It is important to rotate the classes and the levels among the qualified teachers in order to enable them to gain experience of teaching the various levels and age groups.

Seventy-six students in the school have an exemption from study of Irish. Students who received their primary education abroad until the age of eleven account for four exemptions, students from foreign countries who had no understanding of English or Irish on enrolment in the school account for eleven exemptions and students with learning difficulties account for sixty one exemptions. Learning support or language classes are provided for all these students while the Irish lessons are being held.

Significant efforts have been made in the school in recent years to celebrate Seachtain na Gaeilge by organising a céilí mór for TY and fifth year students and by running a table quiz
and other Irish events during that week. Students are brought to Irish plays when these are staged locally. The teachers’ efforts in respect of organising these activities are commended. Such co-curricular and cross-curricular events and activities support the Irish teachers’ work in the classrooms. It is recommended that the programme of activities be developed gradually and that input be sought from the TY students in relation to ideas and assistance in organising the activities.

It was reported that good efforts are made in the school to encourage students to attend Irish-language courses in the Gaeltacht. The County Wicklow Vocational Education Committee (VEC) awards three scholarships to the school annually and the school awards up to six partial scholarships depending on the financial resources available. The teachers do inform the students about available courses but it was reported that there is not a strong tradition in the school of students attending Gaeltacht courses. It is recommended that school management informs the students’ parents of the advantages of spending a period on one of these courses. A post-Gaeltacht youth club is organised in the school once a week and some of the students who attended a particular Gaeltacht college attend that club.

All the Irish teachers have their own rooms and some of those rooms were decorated effectively and attractively with posters, samples of students’ work and other materials associated with teaching and learning the language. There was a small amount of material associated with teaching and learning the language on display in other rooms and it is recommended that the amount of posters and students’ work in those rooms be increased.

There is a budget available for the Irish teachers to purchase materials and resources. Currently, the Irish teachers keep their resources in their own rooms. It is recommended that the resources available to support the teaching and learning of Irish in the school be recorded and that this list of resources form part of the plan for teaching the language. The Irish department has purchased some contemporary Irish novels and it is now intended to locate these in a particular section of the school library and this approach is commended. A suitable novel could be read in second year or with TY students as additional reading.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A co-ordinator for planning for teaching and learning Irish is nominated among the Irish teachers every second year. This is commended as good practice, as it gives all the teachers the opportunity to take on a leadership role in relation to planning coordination for the subject in the school. The coordinator’s duties are currently quite limited. The coordinator’s responsibilities cover convening meetings and keeping minutes of meetings. The teachers and management are encouraged to look at the position of co-ordinator to explore the possibilities of broadening and developing the role.

The Irish teachers meet as a group once per term. Short notes were provided in the Irish file as a record of the meetings. It is recommended that more complete records be kept of decisions taken and the work to be completed. It was reported that the teachers meet more often during the year, as needed.

On the day of inspection, a comprehensive plan was provided for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. The plan gives an accurate account of the composition of the Irish department including aims, objectives, timetabling, division of classes and planning. In addition, a scheme of work is outlined for each level in each year group. The work schemes give a list of topics to be covered, aspects of grammar which need to be taught at different points during the year and a very short account of approaches. The work carried out on the plan and on the work schemes is highly commended. The plan is very accessible and clearly laid out. It is recommended, however, that the plan should function as a working document,
used by all the teachers, which would be updated on an annual basis. It is also recommended that there should be more details given of the methodologies for teaching the various topics and that it should contain more information on the use of appropriate resources. It is also recommended that planning for use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the teaching of the language should form a central part of the plan.

A comprehensive plan for teaching of Irish in TY was provided also. Much of the plan set out is quite interesting and attractive. It was not clear, however, that all the TY class groups are following the same Irish plan. The school is advised to investigate the possibilities of providing the TY plan for Irish on a modular basis. This would give the teachers the opportunity to undertake aspects of teaching the language in which they are interested. It is important that students in TY are given opportunities to experience of Irish as a living language through a range of creative approaches. For example, the ongoing work relating to making an online Irish programme with one Irish class group in TY, is highly commended.

There was comprehensive planning for the majority of classes observed. Worksheets were prepared for distribution to the students and in certain cases, teachers had sourced some additional resources to use in the classes, which is highly commended.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication was very good in all the lessons observed. Most of the teachers made considerable efforts to avoid the use of translation from Irish to English completely through a range of strategies, for example, through the use of gesture and mime, the use of pictures and through explaining new sentences and words in simple Irish. The teachers are highly commended for their commitment to the use of the target language in the class.

Questioning was used continuously in the classes observed to ensure the students’ knowledge and to maintain the students’ interest in the lesson and in the lesson activities. Students made worthwhile efforts, on the whole, to answer the teacher’s questions in Irish. Students were given opportunities to communicate in the target language in some lessons observed through the use of activities such as pair work. These efforts are highly commended. It was felt overall, however, that there was a need to provide many more opportunities for communication through Irish for students. Some lessons were observed in which students had no opportunity to use the target language apart from answering a few questions from the teacher. The teachers are strongly recommended to discuss different ways and strategies to provide students with the opportunities for talk and participation in their lessons. Strategies such as games, pair work, group work and role play should be employed. It is essential that every student in each class should have a chance to speak Irish on a regular basis.

It would be well worth while looking at some of the strategies and class activities recommended by the Second Level Support Service for Irish at the in-service courses which most of the Irish teachers have attended. Some lessons were observed in which teachers ensured that students were able to pronounce and say words and sentences in Irish properly and that good practice is commended. Other lessons were observed, however, in which there was a need to focus more on that aspect of learning the language. The students’ self-confidence must be increased from the point of view of speaking the language, something which is difficult to do unless they are able to pronounce Irish words properly.

One or two lessons were observed in which additional materials apart from the textbook were used to add to the teaching and learning of the language and the teachers’ efforts in that respect are highly commended. In one case observed, a clip from a television programme was shown which was linked to the material being covered in the lesson. In another lesson
observed, use was made of pictures taken from the internet and it was intended to use a notice from the internet based on the content of the lesson the following day in the class. Use was also made in a couple of cases of flashcards to add to certain aspects of the lesson, and of a clock to help students learn about the time in Irish. A picture of Shrek, the cartoon character, was used in one case to teach parts of the body. The teachers are commended for finding and using different resources in those lessons. Their use added greatly to the students understanding of the content of the lessons and it added to the students’ interest in learning.

However, the use of a range of resources needs to be increased in all lessons. It is recommended that greater use be made of music, podcasts, television programmes, the internet, pictures, photographs, games and posters in all classes. Teaching and learning of Irish must be placed in a contemporary context for students to add to their interest in learning the language. Effective use can be made of a wide range of resources to put prose and poetry in a daily contemporary context for students. It is recommended that the teachers discuss this issue among themselves and devise a range of strategies to make learning Irish more interesting and more attractive for students. There are excellent ICT resources available in all the classrooms and teachers are strongly advised to use them regularly, as appropriate.

The vast majority of classes observed involved a variety of activities, something which is highly commended. The students had three or four tasks to complete and this contributed greatly to the pace of the lessons and to maintaining the students’ interest for the duration of the lesson. The variety of activities gives the teachers the opportunity to focus on the four language skills – listening, reading, speaking and writing. It is recommended that there be a balance between practising the four skills in the class and in homework given.

Overall, there was very good rapport between the teachers and the students and discipline was excellent. Most of the students were attentive and worked diligently in the classes. In one case observed, students were asked to find new words that they didn’t know in the dictionary. This approach is highly commended as it is important to explain to students how to use dictionaries properly. It is also recommended that the students be shown in class how to use the online dictionary, for example, Focal.ie.

One lesson was observed in which a poetry class was taught in an effective manner. Two poems from the course were compared and worthwhile efforts were made to place the poetry in context for the students. The poetry techniques being used were explained and it was clear that the students were listening and learning. The students were advised of the importance of expressing their own thoughts and opinions about the literature on the courses when answering the examination questions. It should be noted that pair work is a very effective way to encourage students to talk and to debate a poem’s themes, especially if it is a higher-level class group or a good ordinary-level class group and the students have reasonably good language skills.

ASSESSMENT

In-school examinations are organised in the school at Christmas and in the summer. Class tests are held before the two mid-term breaks. The teachers organise common examinations for the appropriate classes and levels and this approach is highly commended. Reports are sent home to parents after the in-school examinations.

It was reported that the students’ Irish oral skills are assessed in sixth year before they do the Leaving Certificate oral examination by setting them a mock oral examination. Without a doubt it is important to assess the students’ spoken skills in sixth year as preparation for the oral examination but those communicative skills should be assessed for every student in each year of the school. It is extremely important that the students understand the importance of
spoken ability in the language from first year onwards in the school. Although this can be assessed up to a point through the normal daily conversation in the class, it is essential that there be an aspect of formal assessment involved also. The teachers are encouraged to discuss the various ways in which this can be done during the year. The teachers could assess each other’s students and this would give the students a chance to experience other people apart from their own teacher speaking Irish to them.

There was a considerable amount of work completed in the copybooks examined. There was considerable variation, however, in relation to correction of the copybooks. Some of the copybooks examined were corrected very carefully indeed and some others were not. It is recommended that the teachers discuss the question of correcting copybooks and assessment issues in general, in order to arrive at an agreed approach which would ensure that students learn from their written errors.

The number of students taking the higher-level papers in Irish in the certificate examinations, both in Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate, is fairly low. There was a significant increase in the number of students who took the higher-level papers in Irish in the Junior Certificate in 2009, however. School management and the Irish teachers are advised to build on that trend and to give priority to raising significantly the number of students taking higher level in the certificate examinations.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The Irish teachers’ efforts in celebrating Seachtain na Gaeilge in the school through organising a series of activities and events are commended.
- Some of the classrooms were decorated effectively with posters and other material associated with teaching and learning the language as well as students’ project work.
- There was comprehensive planning for most of the lessons observed and the lessons were well-paced as a result.
- Worthwhile efforts were made in some lessons to provide opportunities for students to communicate in the target language by organising pair work and group work during the lessons.
- The way in which ICT and other resources were used during some of the lessons observed is commended.
- There was a good variety of activities in the lessons observed, which resulted in students in some lessons being given the chance to practise the four language skills.
- Various examples of best practice in teaching were seen in the lessons observed.

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

- The school management are advised to look at the possibilities of providing five periods of Irish per week in one of the year groups in the junior cycle.
- It is recommended that the teachers be given appropriate opportunities to teach the different levels and age groups.
- School management are encouraged to inform students and parents of the advantages associated with spending time on an Irish course in the summer.
- It is recommended that the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school be further developed. This plan should contain a description of methodologies and a list of resources for use in lessons, as well as planning for the use of ICT in teaching the language.
• It is recommended that the possibilities of delivering the TY plan for Irish on a modular basis be explored so that students would have access to a wide range of experiences and interesting activities during that year.
• It is recommended that opportunities for speaking Irish be provided for students in all lessons and that the oral skills of all students in the school are assessed on an annual basis.
• A much wider range of resources should be used in all the Irish lessons.

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

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