An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St. Munchin’s College, Corbally
Limerick
Roll Number: 64240G

Date of inspection: 23 February 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Munchin’s College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching 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 learning and teaching. 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Students have either five or six Irish classes per week, a provision that is fully appropriate. Having six classes a week is most helpful to students and to teachers working on the higher-level Leaving Certificate programme. As regards those students who undertake the ordinary-level programme, it would be worthwhile for teachers to reflect on means by which the additional time could be employed to establish cross-curricular and co-curricular activities that provide for the natural integration of Irish with other functional skills.

Most first-year classes are of mixed ability. A streaming system applies in other year groups. Teachers are very committed to improving their students’ competence in Irish. In an effort to achieve this, students are streamed into higher, ordinary and foundation-level groups. Such a division is far removed from established best practice, particularly at junior cycle level. Teachers are reminded that it is the same syllabus, more or less, that is followed by all junior cycle students, although the pace may vary. In light of this, it is recommended that a banding or mixed-ability system would apply rather than a streaming system. This would provide for a wider range of abilities amongst class students. Consequently, there should be a greater improvement in the communicative skills of students of average ability as they learn alongside students of higher ability. Similarly, it is envisaged that students of lower ability would benefit from learning with others. This, of course, would also depend on the learning and teaching activities applied in the lessons, a point that will be further developed later in this report.

There are five teachers of Irish in the school and Irish is the main subject taught by four of these. It was indicated that the same teachers teach the higher-level Leaving Certificate course each year. It is recommended that a rotation system be applied so that all teachers would gain experience of teaching at the various levels. Such a system would ensure that the professional skills of all department members would be developed. There are implications here for subject-development planning and it would be beneficial for teachers to openly discuss the various
strategies they apply when preparing students for the certificate examinations, either by means of a discussion on improving the standard of high-achieving students, or by discussing how reluctant learners might be motivated.

Two of the teachers have attended the in-career development workshops for Irish organised by the Second Level Support Services (SLSS). Frequently the matters discussed at these meetings include the most recent strategies emerging in the learning and teaching of Irish as well as methodologies that focus on the needs and interests of today’s teenagers. The teachers are committed to the transfer of Irish to the next generation and to this end they need to be familiar with all methodologies, resources, supports and on-going events. In view of this, it is strongly recommended that as many teachers as possible attend these in-service courses. A further advantage accruing from these meetings is that they provide opportunities for teachers to discuss practice.

The teachers, in general, have a high standard of Irish. In a very small number of cases it was noted that teachers did not speak Irish fluently. It is strongly recommended that appropriate support be provided to these teachers, that they avail of as many opportunities as possible to speak Irish and also that they pay particular attention to their accuracy in spoken and written Irish. It was indicated that some teachers function as examiners for the State Examinations’ Commission, an experience that is very helpful to them as they prepare students for certificate examinations.

The Irish classes are taught in the students’ own classrooms. It was indicated that each teacher will have his/her own room as soon as the school building has been refurbished. This is welcomed as the arrangement currently in place curtails the ability of teachers to create a motivational learning environment. It is also difficult for them to make more use of a wide range of resources. As the refurbishment work has not yet begun, it is recommended, as a short term solution, that the feasibility of assigning one or two rooms to Irish – for example, a junior room and a senior room, might be explored. It is also recommended that a suitable atmosphere for Irish and for learning be developed in these rooms. It would be good to provide some Irish reading materials in these rooms as well as displaying some common phrases, the most commonly-used verbs, word banks and samples of students’ work on the walls. The desks in these rooms could be organised in a manner that would facilitate communication between students. Presses would be required to store those resources and other documents acquired by members of the department. Furthermore, it is recommended that a data projector, screen, television and DVD player be provided for these rooms.

Forty-nine students are exempt from learning Irish. This represents nine percent of the total number of students. Twenty five of these students have special educational needs and the remainder are students who received their early education outside of the state. These students often remain in the class during Irish lessons and engage in personal study. It is recommended that the issue of exemptions be reviewed: that the grounds for exemptions are clearly established; that strategies be explored whereby these students might be engaged in appropriate learning during Irish classes and that means would be sought whereby such students could be encouraged to participate in the activities of Irish classes. School authorities are reminded of Circular M29/95 and the requirements outlined therein with regard to ensuring that students have a minimum of twenty-eight contact hours per week.

Debating and Seachtain na Gaeilge are some of the co-curricular and extracurricular activities used to promote Irish outside of the classroom. The school has a Debating Club and in-school competitions are organised on a regular basis. Each year, junior and senior teams participate in
debating competitions organised by Gael-Linn. Teachers are commended for their efforts in promoting the use of Irish outside the classroom. A prize is awarded each year to the junior cycle student who makes the greatest effort to improve his own Irish as well as to promote the use of Irish outside the classroom. A more tangible Irish atmosphere could be promoted around the school by displaying bilingual notices, or by organising a Lá Gaeilge on occasions during the year. It is recommended that the school would, as a matter of course, include some Irish in any school correspondence or publications, for example, on the school website or stationery.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Included in the documents of the Irish department’s file is its policy on the teaching of Irish, a record of its co-curricular activities, information on training workshops, communication with external organisations, marking schemes, minutes of meetings and a brief account of the language programmes covered with the various year groups.

The minutes of the Irish meetings indicate that a considerable amount of time is given to discussing students’ competence in Irish and the ways in which the needs of those students with lower competence can be addressed. Teachers are reminded that the methodologies applied in the teaching of Irish in primary schools have changed somewhat in recent years. It would be worthwhile for all teachers to familiarise themselves with the Irish programme in the primary-school curriculum, as well as with the curricular guidelines for primary-school teachers. Having done this, it may be necessary to amend the first-year programme to provide a more central place for the methodologies that are applied at primary level. It would also be a good idea to discuss with local primary-school teachers the experiences students have had of learning Irish before coming to the school. It is recommended that advice be sought from the Special Education Support Services (www.sess.ie) in regard to the most appropriate approach to providing for the needs of students who have special educational needs.

The school has developed links with the University of Limerick and student teachers of Irish come to the school on teaching practice. Different members of the department act as mentors to these students. It was reported that these students spend periods observing classroom practice before they teach a lesson, or part of a lesson. The members of the department are commended for facilitating the development of these students’ teaching skills. This link presents many possibilities for developing the teaching skills of all teachers by establishing a team-teaching scheme where, for example, classroom practices are formally discussed and reviewed. One way of disseminating information on methodologies and stimulating group discussion on classroom practice is to have a central location where resources can be placed and accessed by all.

The Transition Year (TY) programme was reviewed and the emphasis placed on the cultivation of the four language skills was noted. This approach, and also the assessment methods that provide a balance for the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – is commendable. It is strongly recommended, when this programme is being reviewed and developed in the future, that all references to the Leaving Certificate oral examination be omitted. Teachers are reminded that TY is in itself a programme and that it is expected that students would be engaged in learning activities independent of the work they will be undertaking for the Leaving Certificate examination. It is recommended that greater emphasis would be placed on skills’ development: language skills, team skills, research skills, presentation skills, creative skills and organisational skills.
Teachers, in general, prepared well for their classes. Lesson activities were clearly presented and in each case there was a clear connection between the elements of the language used during the various activities. Such an approach is commended, particularly as it enables students to repeatedly practice the newly-acquired language. Teachers had also prepared various resources that consisted mainly of worksheets. In one case, photographs of sports’ personalities were used to encourage students to elicit opinions, and as a result, they engaged enthusiastically with the content of the lesson. Further use of such authentic materials is strongly encouraged.

It is considered that students would benefit more from being clearly informed of the intended learning outcomes at the beginning of the lesson. Not only would this promote self-evaluation but it would focus all participants, both students and their teachers, on the skills to be developed. This is only one of many strategies pertaining to Assessment for Learning and it is considered that there are many other similar strategies that could be tried and implemented over time. Further information is available on the website www.action.ncca.ie.

Learning and Teaching

Irish was the predominant language in all lessons observed. The majority of teachers, for most part, used only Irish in interactions with their students. Individual questioning was the most common strategy used to get students to speak Irish. In those instances where students were given a real opportunity to speak, they made a good effort to speak Irish with each other. The spoken ability of one particular group of students was noted and it was indicated that this level of fluency has been developed over a number of years. The emphasis, from the beginning, was on the development of students’ oral language skills and this is evident in the understanding they now have of the teacher’s normal use of the language, in their authentic communication with each other, and in the comprehensive answers provided by them to basic information questions and to higher-order questions. It is commendable practice to have students communicating with each other throughout the lesson and it is recommended that these strategies should be more widely and more regularly used. Those teachers who do not revert to English when conveying meaning are also commended. This is another practice that should be extended and it is recommended that the use of Irish in lessons and also strategies to avoid the over-use of English would be formally discussed at meetings of the department.

Pastimes and sport were the topics discussed in many of the classes observed. This topic is in line with the interests and experiences of students and they were therefore motivated to participate in lessons. The tasks completed by the students included oral questioning of each other, the completion of information grids, and oral answering of teachers’ questions. In some instances, one-word answers to teachers’ questions were accepted and very little attempt was made to correct students’ pronunciation. It is recommended that it would be a policy of the department to only accept full sentences from students, including students of lower ability. Teachers are also reminded of the importance attached to ‘wait time’: when a student is questioned the appropriate time must be provided for him to bring the required information to mind, to compose an answer and to convey it.

In another instance, a poem was read for the first time and students were assigned various tasks to ensure that they understood the poem and to provide them with opportunities to practice the four language skills. The variety of tasks prompted the ongoing participation of students, and the enjoyment students derived from working cooperatively was noted. A good learning outcome was evident by the end of this lesson. Pair work is a simple but effective means of engaging students in conversation with each other and it was the predominant approach used in another lesson that
was observed. In this particular instance, students were clearly very familiar with the teacher’s methodology and they engaged immediately with the content of the lesson. In one or two instances it appeared that the layout of the classrooms limited the number and variety of interactive tasks that were possible. Once rooms are re-furbished, it is recommended that desks would be organised in a semi-circle or as three sides of a rectangle so that students can see each other and that the teacher can circulate.

A limited range of resources was used in the lessons observed. Worksheets and the whiteboard were the most frequently used resources. A dictionary was made available to the students of one particular class, a practice that promotes independent learning and that would be worth extending. It is recommended that a wider range of resources be used, most particularly, authentic materials such as magazines, posters, brochures, pictures, websites, authentic texts, podcasts and other such materials, that are specifically directed towards teenagers. Students live in a colourful technological world where a great emphasis is placed on hearing and seeing things. Therefore if teachers want to motivate students it would be worthwhile giving them an experience within the classroom of their own world. It is not necessary to use materials that are only in Irish – it is sufficient that the material prompts students to speak and to give their opinions in Irish.

The range of abilities of students was noted. This included from first-year students with special educational needs requiring learning support, to fluent sixth-year students preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination. The department’s attitude to developing each student’s standard of Irish and the attention given to the individual needs of students is commendable. The good rapport between teachers and students greatly enhanced the learning experience, and teachers frequently praised students’ work and efforts. When teachers are preparing for future work they should be mindful of emerging new practices and they should consider the benefits of trialling and implementing such practices in their own classes.

**ASSESSMENT**

Students’ progress is assessed in various ways. These assessments include oral assessment in class, correction of written homework, monitoring of class work, class tests, house examinations, preliminary examinations and oral examinations. In first year, the common examinations are used, a practice that is commendable. Should a banding system be applied in future, as recommended in this report, it would be worth extending the practice of common examinations as it ensures that the main language programme is being followed by each year group, even if the pace is slower in some classes.

Students’ competence in Irish is assessed on enrolment. These results, as well as the results in English and Mathematics, are used to assign students to classes. Management is asked to reconsider the need for giving these students a written examination, particularly in view of the greater emphasis in recent years on developing the oral language skills of primary school pupils.

The teachers are aware of the significant increase in the percentage of marks to be allocated to students’ oral Irish in the certificate examinations and they have therefore started to regularly assess first year students oral competency in Irish. This is commended.

Samples of students’ written work were examined during the evaluation. Most students had completed a range of tasks that were mainly comprehension tests, written exercises and grammar tasks. The variation in the regularity and comprehensiveness of the correction of student copybooks by teachers was noted. It is strongly recommended that every teacher would regularly
monitor students’ work and provide worthwhile feedback for students regarding the means by which they could improve their standard of work. Teachers are also reminded of the importance of getting students to correct their main language errors and they are requested to spend time on this in class. As part of this process, it would be worthwhile for the department to reflect on the benefits that would accrue from implementing assessment for learning strategies.

In addition to the reports sent home after the main examinations, parents are kept informed of the progress of students through the parent teacher meetings that are held once a year. The school diary is used also, when necessary.

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable is fully supportive of the learning and teaching of Irish.
- Teachers had prepared well for the lessons observed.
- Irish was the predominant language in lessons.
- The spoken ability of some students was noted.
- In some instances, students were required to communicate with each other in Irish.
- There was a good rapport between teachers and students.
- The assessment system provides for a balance of the four language skills.
- All participants are kept informed of the progress being made.

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 means by which students are allocated to classes be reviewed and that consideration be given to the benefits of a mixed-ability or a banding system.
- It is recommended that each teacher would gain experience of teaching Irish at the various levels.
- It is recommended that the subject-development planning process would be further progressed.
- It is recommended that even greater use would be made of teaching, learning and assessment strategies that promote the development of spoken Irish.

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

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board appreciates the efficiency and courtesy of the Inspectorate in carrying out the subject inspection. The Board of Management commends the excellent work that is done by all of its Irish teachers in the school. It is delighted that the inspection process affirms the excellent strengths that are in the subject department in the school, but it is also a limited process that gained only an isolated snapshot of the excellent work carried out by all of the teachers in the department.

The Board would also point out that this was further limited by the constraints of the industrial action that were in place throughout the country at the time of the inspection. This limited the interaction between the teaching staff and the inspector who was only present in the school for one day. It is gratifying to see that the report has commended an outstanding rapport that exists between the teachers and students in the classes.

The Board commends the work of the Irish teachers in maintaining two out of four classes at higher level for the leaving certificate up to the present day and for their involvement in many extra-curricular and co-curricular activities each year. The Board notes that the results achieved and the number of students taking Irish at higher level is above the National Average.

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

In September 2010 the school changed to a teacher based classroom system. There has been an increased rotation of teachers between levels in the 2010/2011 timetabling. Through the provision of ICT grant funding in the 2010/2011 school year, computers and digital projectors will have been installed in all of classrooms by the end of the school year.

In 2010/2011 the number of teachers involved as examiners in the Irish oral examination has doubled. The school will look at the development of assessment for learning strategies as a whole school approach.