Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Our Lady’s Bower
Athlone, County Westmeath
Roll number: 63210P

Date of inspection: 25 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 Our Lady’s Bower, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

A subject inspection of Irish in the junior cycle was conducted in 2004.

Provision and support for Irish in the school is good. The school’s Irish language teaching team comprises six teachers. Information requested regarding the teachers’ qualifications and their registered subjects was not made available. The oral Irish proficiency of those teachers whose classes were observed was satisfactory.

The management is highly commended for the equitable distribution of the Irish class periods on the weekly timetable in the case of each year group. In keeping with best practice, the distribution of class periods ensures that each class group has a single class period on a daily basis. This provides students with regular contact with the language, and benefits them in acquiring the language. The amount of time provided for Irish on a weekly basis for the established Leaving Certificate and Transition Year (TY) is satisfactory. In addition to these programmes, the school also provides the Leaving Certificate Applied in senior cycle. It was reported that the students participating in this programme during the current year are exempt from the study of Irish and are therefore not taking the Gaeilge Chumarsáideach course as part of the programme. With regard to the amount of time provided for Irish in the junior cycle, it is recommended that one additional class period per week be added to the current allocation in at the very least one year of the cycle. Irish classes are timetabled simultaneously in the case of third, fifth and sixth year. This organisation is commendable because it facilitates student access to the subject at the level which best suits their needs, especially when approaching certificate examinations. The procedures followed when a student transfers from one level to another were not clear. Senior management should ensure that clear procedures are in place for implementation when such a situation arises, and that parents and the career guidance teacher, together with the student and the relevant teachers, have an input in the decision reached.

The students are allocated to mixed-ability classes in first and second years. This organisation of classes is good practice. In accordance with the programme’s philosophy, TY students are also allocated to mixed-ability classes.
As was the position in 2004, and although a new school building has since been erected, classes are conducted on two sites. The main school site contains the new building where the vast majority of classes are conducted, while the first-year classes are conducted on the second site which is home to the convent and to the boarding school. Apart from this arrangement, the teachers are, for the most part, classroom based in the new building. Besides teachers working at both sites, in some cases, first-year students attend Irish classes in the new building.

In the context of the developments which have taken place in the school in general, significant progress has been made in the provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which is available for the teaching and learning of Irish. It was evident during this visit that the recommendation made in the 2004 report regarding developing the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of Irish had been acted upon. Broadband access, computer and whiteboard were available in all classrooms and two of the classrooms visited had an interactive whiteboard. There was evidence that the Irish department has utilised these improvements to develop resources for the subject, which can be accessed from a central folder which they share on the school’s intranet. This work is highly commendable.

An exemption from the study of Irish in accordance with the provisions of Circular Letter M10/94 was granted to nine per cent of the total enrolment. Students from abroad who had no knowledge of English when enrolling in the school, comprised two-thirds of those students, and the majority of the remainder had recognised learning needs. It is commendable that the management endeavours where possible to timetable support classes concurrently with Irish classes. During a visit to one of the classes, however, there were two students who did not have an exemption and who made it known that they were just beginning to participate in Irish classes although they were in their second year in the school. It is strongly recommended that management ensures such an occurrence is not repeated, and that appropriate Irish provision be made available to every student not in receipt of an official exemption.

It is clear that action was taken in the case of the recommendation in the last report concerning the display of Irish materials and students’ work on the walls of the classrooms. Among the materials there was a trophy from a TG4 2009 film competition. This illustrates that opportunities are created for TY students to expand their Irish language learning experience, and to develop a wide range of creative skills through the language. The work undertaken on the use of Irish in the students’ environment is highly commended.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A current subject plan for Irish was not made available. Therefore it is not possible to comment on the quality of the current plan for Irish, to recognise any strengths that might attach to it, or to provide guidance to benefit its development.

It was recommended in the 2004 report that the Irish department be established on a formal basis to plan for the subject, and that the Irish department convene regular meetings. The Irish plan for 2005/2008 was made available. This included a scant subject plan for second year only for 2005/06. It also contained scant plans for the 2006/07 school year for the majority of year groups and levels. There were minutes in the plan from a number of meetings convened by the department. It is commendable that the report on the inspection of Irish conducted in 2004 was discussed at a meeting of the department on 26 August 2005. Minutes of that meeting revealed that it was decided that a coordinator was not necessary despite the recommendation in the
inspection report that members of the department would accept the role in turn. It was clear that the decision had been reviewed by the date of this visit and, in keeping with best practice, a coordinator had been nominated.

There was no written evidence of teachers’ planning for individual classes. Having said that, it was clear from most of the classes observed that good planning and preparation had been undertaken. Much praise is deserved in those cases where available aids and resources were taken into consideration in the planning and preparation process to respond to the students’ varying learning styles, the integrated development of the various language skills, and the students’ different abilities and Irish language learning experience. The case where well-chosen authentic texts of art and music were sourced to assist students in developing their understanding of the lesson material and to identify with it is particularly praiseworthy.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teaching and learning of Irish was of good quality. In a small number of classes visited, excellent practice in teaching and learning was observed.

As was observed before, Irish was the medium of instruction and communication in all classes. In the case of a small number of classes, there was an evident tendency to use translation to assist students in understanding the content. In accordance with the good practice in the majority of classes, alternative strategies should be used to help avoid a need to use translation.

The roll was called and replied to in Irish at the beginning of the lesson in some cases. This good practice should be replicated in every class. It would also be worthwhile spending a few minutes in conversation in Irish on a topical subject while the students settle down for the lesson as happened in a few classes.

Arising from the recommendation made in the last report, the aim of the lesson was introduced to the students at the beginning of every class. It was also recommended in the last report that this practice be developed and that the expected learning outcomes be shared with the students. One such example was observed. It was done very effectively in that the vocabulary used made it very clear to the students what they would be able to do as a result of the work and the various activities they would engage in during the lesson. Therefore, it is recommended again, that the use of this example of best practice be extended to all lessons. In addition, and as was recommended already, a few minutes should be availed of at the end of a lesson to give students an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned. Guidance on prompt questions was included in the last report.

A variety of methodologies and teaching and learning strategies were used in the lessons, and in most cases they stimulated the students’ active participation. Best practice was observed in the small number of cases where the various methodologies and strategies addressed the students’ varying learning styles, and where those selected supported the integrated development of the four main language skills. Some samples of pair work and group work were observed. These were organised very effectively in those cases where the group members had a definite role, where instructions were clear, where information gaps had to filled, and where the time targets for the task were adhered to. The case where groups of students engaged in role play to present the text they had generated as a group-work task is also highly commended. The method, in which it was ensured that the audience attention was on the presentation through asking questions about the material when the presentation was completed, is particularly praiseworthy. In the case of a
minority of classes observed, the work was over-directed by the text book and this practice should be avoided.

An excellent example was observed of the teaching of literature. Authentic texts in various media were effectively used to help students understand the theme, feelings and images in the text as well as introducing them to the writer. In more than half of the classes observed, ICT was used and indeed used very effectively. In a few instances, very effective use was made of ICT to check the home work or the students’ prior learning of the vocabulary on various themes.

Most of the lessons had a definite structure. In the case of a minority of lessons observed, it is recommended that more effective use be made of the available class-contact time, and the nature of the tasks being used as homework arising out of class work be taken into consideration at the planning stage. References were made to grammar in a number of lessons and this is praiseworthy because of the importance of developing the students’ levels of language awareness and their capacity to communicate effectively. The instances where the students’ knowledge of the roots of verbs was being developed, and their skills in the use of adjectives in sentences, are especially commendable.

The atmosphere in all the classes was supportive of learning. Students were affirmed in all classes and a very good work ethic was observed among them in the majority of classes. It was clear in most classes that the teachers had high learning expectations of the students. Students, in most of the classes, demonstrated a good level of understanding of the questions asked and expressed themselves effectively and with confidence through the medium of Irish.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school has a homework policy which is to be implemented by the Irish department. The policy focuses attention on the needs which are especially pertinent to the development of the students’ writing skills for examination purposes. In the next review of the policy, it is recommended that it takes cognisance of the developmental needs of the four main language skills. This would support the teachers in the creation of opportunities for the students to develop the four main language skills through homework, and to include a richer variety of work in it. At the time of the evaluation, the school did not have a written assessment policy. Formal examinations are conducted on two occasions annually as well as mock certificate examinations in the case of third and sixth years. It is good practice, as occurs in the case of first and second years, to use common examinations where class groups are studying at the same levels. Information was not available regarding the modes of assessment used in the case of the various language skills for the current school year. In the next review of the homework policy, it could be extended to include procedures and modes of assessment and be recorded under a heading such as ‘homework and assessment’.

The teachers checked the homework in all the classes observed, and it was collected for correction purposes in a few cases. Also, in accordance with good practice, homework based on class work, was assigned in all instances. A sample of students’ school journals was reviewed. Although it is mentioned clearly in the school’s homework policy which is available in the journals that “the school journal is an essential textbook”, it was clear that this was not being implemented in every class. In general, the journals indicated that they could be used more effectively as a resource to develop the students’ skills as independent learners, and to give them greater responsibility for their own work. Special praise is due to an example of such homework which was assigned in one instance. Work had been done in class on the basic skills and the
essential vocabulary, but the students were required to reflect on the material and form their own opinions on it and prepare to provide feedback in the next class.

Samples of the students’ written work were reviewed. Best practice in terms of correction procedures were in place in the instances where credit was given to the students for work which was well done or correctly done, and where guidance was given on ways in which they could improve the work. Such practice should be extended, and further information on assessment for learning can be found at [www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl](http://www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl).

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The level of support and provision for Irish in the school is good.
- The amount of time allocated to Irish in the senior cycle is satisfactory, and the distribution of class periods during the week is satisfactory in the case of all year groups.
- The students are assigned to mixed-ability classes in first year, second year and in Transition Year.
- Significant progress has been made on the provision of ICT, which is available for the teaching and learning of Irish, and examples of its effective use were observed.
- The teaching and learning of Irish was of good quality, and in most classes it was clear that the teachers had high learning expectations for the students.
- Irish was the medium of instruction and communication in all classes.
- The aim of the lesson was introduced to the students at the commencement of each lesson.
- A variety of teaching and learning strategies was used in the lessons, and in most cases they encouraged the students’ active participation.
- The students were affirmed for their efforts in all classes and a very good work ethic was evident among them in most classes.

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

- It is recommended that management provides one additional class period for Irish per week in, at the very least, one year in junior cycle.
- It is strongly recommended that management ensures appropriate provision for Irish is made in the case of each student who does not have an official exemption from Irish.
- It is recommended again, as observed in one class, that the good practice whereby the expected learning outcomes are shared with the students at the commencement and a few minutes are allocated at the end of the lesson to allow them reflect on their learning, be extended to all classes.
- In the case of a minority of the lessons observed, it is recommended that more effective use be made of the available class contact time.
- In the next review of the homework policy it is recommended that it recognises the needs of the four main language skills to be developed, and that it be extended to include procedures and other assessment modes employed.
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.

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