

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Maynooth Post-Primary School
Maynooth, County Kildare
Roll number: 70700A**

Date of inspection: 4 March 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | 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 Maynooth Post-Primary School. 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 deputy principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

A whole-school evaluation was conducted in Maynooth Post-Primary School in 2006. The school provides an all-Irish stream at the junior cycle level. There is one class group in each year of the all-Irish stream and it was stated that students can access most of the curriculum, with the exception of other languages, through Irish.

Irish enjoys a high status in the school. On the school's Irish teaching staff there are nine teachers who are qualified to teach Irish. Regarding the teaching of Irish in the all-Irish stream, management should ensure that all teachers are fully competent in Irish. Management recognises the importance of the teachers' experience in implementing the Irish curriculum in the various programmes and at the different levels provided by the school as part of their continuing professional development. The timetables for the majority of teachers indicate variety in the levels being taught by them in both cycles. A postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE) student was working with the Irish department during the current school year.

Very good provision in terms of time allocation is made for Irish on the school's timetable. The provision is very generous in senior cycle where seven class periods are provided each week for higher-level classes and six class periods for all other classes. There is also very good provision in junior cycle, but in the case of a small number of class groups the number of Irish class periods allocated is reduced. Students in these particular class groups are the weakest in their year groups. It is recommended that management ensures equity in terms of input and students' access in the subject in the case of every student. With the exception of the students in the weakest class group the remaining students are allocated to mixed-ability classes in first year, an arrangement which is good practice. The class groups in all years in the all-Irish stream are of mixed ability. It was reported that various arrangements ranging from mixed-ability classes to banding are in place for allocating students to classes in second year. Classes are timetabled in bands, but it was reported for example, that the streaming of students within the bands is commenced during second year. It is recommended that management clarify and document the arrangements regarding the allocation

of students to classes in the interest of all partners. The management is also referred to the Inspectorate publication *Looking at Irish at Junior Cycle* (2007, p 7) in which it is stated that “the use of mixed-ability classes in some or all of the junior cycle years would provide the best learning experience for students, particularly for the development of communicative Irish.” The arrangements for the allocation of students to classes in Transition Year are in accordance with the programme’s philosophy. Classes are streamed in fifth year and in sixth year. The use of concurrent timetabling of the class periods facilitates the students’ access to the subject at the level which is most appropriate to their needs.

Although the provision of aids and resources for teaching and learning including information and communication technology (ICT) is very good in the main building, the management should ensure equity of access for the teachers’ and students’, whose classes are in prefabricated classrooms, to a similar level of provision. At the time of the evaluation, work was progressing on the new school library. This is an important development which the teachers of Irish will be able to use to provide the students with access to a wide range of reading material in Irish.

Management provides very good support to the teachers in order to progress the language in the school, and to facilitate their participation in continuing professional development opportunities. Recently staff members participated in the projects *Abair Leat* and *Fón*. It was reported that approximately half of the teachers attended inservice in Irish during the past five years. Apart from that, the management facilitated inservice sessions on areas such as differentiation and assessment for learning (AFL) on a whole-school basis.

The work engaged in to enable students to participate in debating competitions and in other activities which provide them with opportunities to use Irish outside the classroom and also during various activities during the school year is especially praiseworthy. In the interest of balance, strategies should be examined in order to encourage those students who are not in the all-Irish stream to participate in debating competitions.

Nine per cent of the total enrolment has been granted an exemption from the study of Irish. Students from abroad comprised more than half of these students. In accordance with good practice, management makes every effort to timetable support classes concurrently with the Irish classes for those students who are entitled to them.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school has structures and effective practices which support the work of the Irish department. The teachers rotate the role of department coordinator. The role is accepted for a two-year period, a period which is very suitable. Formal meetings are convened regularly throughout the year and minutes are maintained. Management suggests specific areas to be discussed at the meetings. Included are schemes of work, students’ achievement, methodologies, resources and planning and the development of common examinations.

The subject plan including the schemes of work was of a low quality. It is recommended that the plan, and the schemes of work in particular, be comprehensively developed. A similar recommendation was included in the WSE report. Given that the school provides Irish in different contexts, it is recommended that clear aims be set out. With regard to planning for the subject for the various year groups and levels, including Transition Year, a framework of the learning outcomes to be expected at various stages during the school year should be devised. The learning outcomes should be based on the language functions and on the four main language skills to be

developed. The framework would assist the planning for differentiated learning and the specification of assessment criteria. It is recommended that a reading of the schemes would indicate the thematic integration of language skills development and the various aspects of the course. In addition, it is recommended that *Curaclam na Bunscoile: Gaeilge* (L1 and L2) be consulted when designing the school transfer assessment and when planning for the subject in first year.

The current schemes of work include an appropriate emphasis on grammar and language structure and should be used in the developments being recommended here. Although some references are made to teaching methodologies and strategies in the schemes, an account of those to be used, including the assessment modes, to achieve the learning outcomes should be available. Furthermore, they should include an insight into the aids and resources to be utilised, in addition to textbooks, to support the learning.

Although one of the classes observed had a PGDE student for two days per week and this teacher's planning was to hand, it was reported that the main class teacher did not have specific planning for this particular year group. In instances such as this, the division of work and the monitoring and review to be undertaken should be laid out clearly in both circumstances. It was reported that the schemes are reviewed, but there was no evidence recorded in the available documents. The schemes are currently laid out on a term basis and this should be continued when more detailed schemes are being developed for individual classes in accordance with the guidelines for teachers in the school handbook.

No specific planning had been undertaken for the classes in the all-Irish stream. The students' copy books and the schemes for second year and third year were the only indicators of subject differentiation in this instance: "Read a novel with the class in the all-Irish stream, if possible; undertake a project on Irish culture with the class, if possible." In addition to what is stated above regarding planning, it is recommended that the focus should be on subject-based planning in this instance. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) would support the principles of the communicative approach, students' access to other curricular areas through the medium of Irish, and cross-curricular collaborative planning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching and learning was of good quality and in some instances, it was very good. Class contact time was used effectively in most cases. In some cases the students were made aware of the lesson's subject content at the outset, and in one instance the different tasks to be completed were recorded on the white board. It is recommended that it be common practice to share the expected learning outcomes with the students at the commencement of the lesson. For this purpose it is recommended that a vocabulary be used which will make the students aware of what they will have learned or what they will be enabled to do as an outcome of the class work. In order to fully implement this strategy, an opportunity should be created for the students at the end of class to reflect on their learning. A learning diary would be useful in this regard in Transition Year.

There was variety in the range and effectiveness of the methods and teaching strategies employed. A few very good examples of the thematic integration of language skills development were observed, as well as the variety of tasks being used in this regard. A small number of samples of well-organised pair work were observed. It is recommended that a greater variety in the methods, strategies and tasks be used in the classes, a development which would support the differentiation of learning.

In a number of instances, very good use was made of questioning by using different styles, including open questions. It is recommended that the use of such a practice be extended. In a few instances the students were asked to absorb additional information from an aural text, and to identify words which they did not understand. In a few instances, drama and gesture were used effectively, together with other words in Irish, and dictionaries to assist the students' understanding of the material being dealt with. This assisted the avoidance of translation, a practice which was over-emphasised in some classes. The teacher was very central in most classes. It should be remembered when lessons are being planned, that students should have an active role, and that a much better balance in terms of input should obtain between teacher and student talk.

A few good examples of the use of technology to support students' learning were observed. In a few instances good use was made of reading texts to check the students' understanding of grammar rules and to revise the rules. In one instance an effective link between the grammar item being studied and a prose text from the course was created. Examples were presented to the students with the aid of ICT, written text, and images. In one instance where the available compact disk player was not working, the teacher deserves praise for giving the aural text to students to read aloud for their fellow students so that they could undertake the test. Use should be made of opportunities created by such tasks to guide students in the development of correct pronunciation as part of their language awareness. In some instances, very good use was made of the white board to support the students, and its use should be extended to support different learning styles and also to demonstrate the correct use of written language.

Irish was the medium of instruction and communication in all classes, but it was evident in a small number of cases that it was common practice to translate questions and vocabulary into English, even in the all-Irish stream, instead of using such opportunities to enrich the students' vocabulary in Irish.

Classroom atmosphere was conducive to learning. The students were making satisfactory progress in their learning.

ASSESSMENT

The school has homework and assessment policies which are to be implemented by the Irish department. Students' learning is assessed on a regular basis. The assessment of students' ability in Irish commences as part of the school-transfer assessment. A report on students' achievement in this test, as well as a report on the results of its analysis should be included in the subject plan. It is only in the case of sixth year that a suitable range of assessment modes is utilised. It is recommended that it be common practice to include the four main language skills when assessing student learning in all year groups.

In keeping with good practice, the department uses common examinations at various points during the school year in those instances where students are studying the subject at the same level, and where students are being re-allocated to classes at the end of the school year. In the case of Transition Year and in the interest of giving more responsibility to the students as independent learners, and to help them develop their awareness of themselves as language learners, it is recommended that the teachers explore how the students could use the *European Language Portfolio* to support their learning.

The homework policy is of good quality since it is sufficiently broad to respond to the needs attaching to the development of the main language skills. Samples of student's diaries from a minority of classes indicated that there is variety in the tasks being assigned for homework such as viewing a particular television programme. The copy books and samples of the students' written work indicate much variety in terms of practice and work organisation. According to the diaries reviewed, homework is not assigned regularly, a practice which is not in conformity with the school's homework policy. In one instance it was reported that homework is not assigned to Transition Year, and that a school diary is not used by those students. In the case of a class in senior cycle, the students' diaries indicated that students were not assigned homework, except on the two days when the PGDE student took the class. These are not good practices and do not accord with school policy.

There was a lot of variation in the practices for the correction of students' written work. Notes of encouragement were observed in the work in half the classes, and in the case of one class they were recorded in English. A small number of samples of guidance being offered on how the work could be improved were evident in the corrections done in the written work. In the interest of sharing good practice and extending its use across the department, it is recommended that the teachers discuss and agree correction practices that would embody the principles associated with assessment for learning. It would be worth including such an amendment in the homework and assessment policies.

The teachers use their diaries to keep a record of the students' achievement and for reporting to parents. For the most part the recordings indicate good practice. However, in the case of one class in Transition Year there was no evidence of the work for which a mark had been awarded, the only mark awarded to the students since the beginning of the year. This is not good practice and it should be reviewed.

Good practice has been established in the school with regard to the analysis of students' achievement in the state examinations, and comparisons are made with the national averages. The levels of students' participation and achievement at the highest levels in both cycles, and especially in the junior cycle, are very good. It was reported that the results are used to identify learning targets, a commendable practice. In order to further enhance this practice and to define challenging learning targets, it is recommended that separate breakdowns be made of students' achievement in the main school and in the all-Irish stream, and that the outcomes of this be used to inform planning for and the review of students' learning in junior cycle and in senior cycle.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish enjoys a high status in the school. Very good provision is made for the language in terms of the time allocation in the school timetable, a provision which is significant in senior cycle.
- The management gives very good support to the teachers to promote the language and for their participation in continuing professional development courses.
- There are effective structures and practices in the school which support the operation of the Irish department.
- Teaching and learning was of good quality and in some instances, it was very good. The level of students' participation at the highest levels in the certificate examinations and their achievement is very good, especially in the junior cycle.

- Common examinations are used at various points during the school year in instances where classes are studying the subject at the same level.
- The practice of analysing students' achievement in the certificate examinations has been established in the school.

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

- As was recommended in the WSE report, it is recommended that the schemes of work for the year groups and the various levels be developed comprehensively and as part of this work a framework of the expected learning outcomes should be devised. In this regard it is recommended that specific planning be undertaken for the teaching and learning of Irish in the all-Irish stream.
- It is recommended that the variety of methodologies, strategies and tasks being used in the classes be extended, including questioning strategies, to support differentiated learning.
- It is recommended that it be common practice to include the four main language skills in the assessment of each year group.
- It is recommended that school policy as regards homework and the use of journals be implemented more consistently across the department and that the teachers agree a constructive approach to the correction of students' written work.

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