

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Pobalscoil na Tríonóide
Youghal, County Cork
Roll number: 91513S**

Date of inspection: 22 September 2010



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Pobalscoil na Tríonóide, Youghal. 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 three 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 subject teachers. The board of management of the school 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

Irish enjoys a high status in Pobalscoil na Tríonóide. One example of this standing is the school's bilingual signage and stationery. A number of school staff members have good proficiency in Irish and it was most satisfying that all the inspection activities were carried out through the medium of Irish. Indeed, the school's Aonad LánGhaeilge (all-Irish Unit) is also a great support in promoting Irish within Pobalscoil na Tríonóide.

Timetabled provision is supportive of the teaching and learning of Irish in so far as the majority of students enjoy daily contact with the target language. Classes are timetabled concurrently from second year onwards, an arrangement which enables teachers to assign students, if necessary, to different class groups according to their level of proficiency in Irish.

First year classes are of mixed ability. In other years, classes are banded into higher and ordinary levels. In the current school year in junior cycle there is one ordinary level class in each band which results in a significant number of students (up to twenty-seven students in certain cases) with the lowest level of proficiency in Irish together in one class. It is strongly recommended that the way in which students are allocated to class groups be reviewed and that consideration be given to the benefits to be gained from having junior-cycle and transition year (TY) students in mixed-ability classes. In relation to Leaving Certificate students, a mixture of abilities within higher and ordinary level bands is recommended.

A total of eighty-one students have an exemption from studying Irish – a figure that equates to nine per cent of the school's total student population. Of these, forty-four students have learning difficulties and the remainder received their early education outside the State. Efforts are made to provide learning support to junior-cycle students when Irish classes are timetabled. Senior-cycle

students with an exemption attend a Geography class when Irish classes are timetabled. This is an effective way of ensuring that every one of these students has seven subjects for the Leaving Certificate examination. It was stated that three students who are entitled to an exemption have decided to study Irish. These students are highly commended as are their teachers for supporting them. It is recommended that details concerning all these students be recorded and updated from year to year. It was reported that, at times, some uncertainty can surround some students entering first year who may not meet the criteria required to grant them an official exemption but contend that they did not study Irish throughout all of their primary schooling. It is strongly recommended that these students study Irish and that, as they are enrolling in the school, this practice is clarified for them, their parents and the primary-school teachers.

The majority of teachers have their own designated classroom, an arrangement which facilitates storage of teaching aids, resources and student work. Several teachers have made very good efforts to create a stimulating learning environment. The charts displayed on the walls function as a reference source for teachers and students during classes. Particular commendation is due to those teachers who, it was evident, had considered the aspects of the language most frequently used by students during lessons and had examples of this same meta-language on display. Almost all classrooms have a commuter as well as a data projector, CD player and television set. The school's computer system has a special file for Irish and electronic resources in Irish. It is most useful for teachers to have such a resource available in a central place.

Senior management and teachers recognise the value of continuing professional development. Teachers welcome the opportunity to attend workshops organised by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. Indeed, they are to be commended for regarding the inspection visit as a development opportunity. It was reported that teachers have a certain degree of freedom in deciding the levels of classes they teach. Management's flexibility in this regard is commended however teachers are reminded of the importance of gaining experience of teaching Irish in the different programmes and at the different levels. It is recommended especially, that every teacher would gain experience of teaching Irish to students in the Aonad LánGhaeilge.

A wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities are organised to promote Irish outside the classroom. The school's *Club Gaeilge* meets on a regular basis. Students are encouraged to enter various competitions organised by *Feis Maitiú* and *Gael-Linn*. It was stated that a large number of events take place during *Seachtain na Gaeilge* which requires the use of Irish among the entire school population. In addition, visits to *Gaeltacht* areas are arranged as well as to *Fíbhín* drama workshops. It was indicated that it is customary for some students to spend a period of time in the *Gaeltacht* during the summer and that the school provides scholarships to support these students. Teachers are especially commended for encouraging students to participate in all these activities.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject-development planning is central to the work of teachers in Pobalscoil na Tríonóide. The planning process is overseen by the department co-ordinator. The position of co-ordinator is rotated among members of the department, an arrangement which is to be commended as it provides opportunities to develop leadership and negotiating skills. In view of the fact that there is a large number of teachers and students of Irish, resulting in an increased volume of duties for the co-ordinator, it might be worthwhile to consider having two co-ordinators. One of whom could take responsibility for curriculum concerns for example, while the other could co-ordinate extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.

Formal meetings of the Irish department take place once a term. It was evident from minutes of these meetings provided to the inspector that it is administration matters, primarily, that are discussed. It is recommended that classroom practice be an item for discussion during these meetings. The subject-planning folder provides a good indication of the cooperation among members of the department. A considerable number of documents have been collated in this folder and therefore it serves as a very useful reference aid. It is recommended that details concerning the students who have an exemption from studying Irish be included in the folder. The electronic files and the resources collected on the school's intranet were also reviewed. A large number of stimulating, interactive resources are available and teachers are commended for having catalogued these resources under different headings.

A planning framework is set out for every year group and refers to the work that will be covered during the terms of the school year. Examples of learning activities, assessment methods and resources which match the different topics are also provided. It is then a matter for individual teachers to develop yearly schemes for the different year groups in their care. Some of these schemes were reviewed and teachers are commended for the time and effort taken to set out comprehensive language programmes for their students. Of particular note was the consideration which many teachers have given to the aspects of the language which students need to acquire as topics are discussed. In order to alleviate the burden of individual planning, it is recommended that the formulation of common schemes of work be included as one of the collaborative planning activities.

Efforts are made to provide TY students with experiences of learning Irish which are different from what they have known to date. The emphasis placed on project work and oral Irish is commended. In relation to the current programme being taken by TY students, there is not much difference in content from that of the subject plans for other year groups. Teachers are reminded of the possibilities offered by the TY programme to trial innovative teaching strategies and learning activities which encourage students to use Irish with different groups both within and outside the school community.

A high degree of teacher preparation was evident in the lessons observed. A good number of teachers had drafted lesson plans which indicated the prior thought and consideration given to the stages of the lesson. Plans which included a significant link between the proposed activities and the desirable learning outcomes specified in the plan were particularly noted. It was evident that every teacher had reflected on the aspects of the language that students would acquire during the lesson. Best practice was observed where a range of authentic communication tasks was designed which provided opportunities for students to practise the newly-acquired language in different ways that necessitated practice, in equal measure, of the four language skills.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers are commended for the energy they bring to their work and the understanding they show of the learning needs of the students in their care. In the course of the inspection visit ten classes were observed in which ongoing worthwhile work was taking place. In the lessons observed it was clear that students were making progress in the subject consistent with the level of their ability. In certain lessons the high standard of teaching and the high quality of learning which resulted merited particular note.

It was evident that many teachers had a long-established system of working. In such cases students engaged with the activity of the lesson without question. The majority of teachers emphasised note taking during the lesson and great benefits are to be gained from the individual records being maintained by students of the learning they have achieved during their Irish lessons. Another practice which promotes independent learning observed in lessons was the use students made of dictionaries. It would be most worthwhile developing this skill in all students.

Irish was the primary language in use in all the lessons observed. A good number of teachers began lessons with open discussion of the principal stories of the day. This is an effective means of establishing an atmosphere of cooperation. Students displayed a good understanding of what teachers were saying and a large majority made very good efforts to express their opinions in a competent manner. The very best practice was in evidence when teachers took the basic student-generated sentences and showed them how to create a more language-rich answer. Every possible effort should be made to enrich the students language and to this end it is recommended that teachers practise the manipulation of speech idioms regularly with students and broaden the range as appropriate.

A good number of teachers used questioning effectively to assess student understanding of the content covered. Student answers provided teachers with an overview of the quality of the learning achieved. It was gratifying that very many students gave comprehensive answers to the questions. It was even more heartening to observe teachers building on lower order questions to asking students higher order questions. In very many cases students made very good efforts to compose questions on their own. However, in other instances students appeared reluctant to form and express their own opinions. In these cases, it is recommended that teachers initiate further interactive tasks such as pair or group work where students are given additional responsibility to direct their own learning. The most significant implication of this approach is the change in the role of the teacher during the lesson. Primarily, one would expect the teacher's input to decrease as regards information provision and the principal function of the teacher would be to ensure that students have acquired the appropriate range of language in order to express themselves and communicate their opinions.

On the whole, there was good variety in the activities organised during lessons which encouraged the ongoing participation of students. There was a thematic link between these activities which strengthened the use of newly-acquired language. Students were enthusiastic in their participation in interactive tasks. In one lesson, two students were asked to perform a sketch, an activity which stimulated the interest of all the students. It is recommended that wider use be made of interactive activities such as these which allow students to communicate with each other. Teachers are reminded that, as a general rule, when planning lesson activities it is better to decide on a range of tasks which would provide students with an opportunity for balanced practice of the four language skills.

It was most helpful for teachers to have the wide range of resources which were conveniently located. Effective use was made of photographs, slides, textbooks, aural excerpts, worksheets and props such as hats and a jam jar. Particular commendation is due to those teachers who, it was evident, had spent time and effort devising stimulating resources.

ASSESSMENT

The school operates a system of assessment which informs all participants in relation to student progress. The different assessment practices are described in the schemes of work of individual

teachers. Methods used to assess student progress include: oral questioning in class; monitoring of student participation in lesson activities; ongoing monitoring of student written work; oral examinations; house examinations; class tests and listening comprehension tests. The practice of assessing student competence in all four language skills is commendable and teachers are to be commended for taking steps in this regard. The emphasis placed on continuous assessment and on acknowledging the year's work in the assessment system was noted.

The department's homework policy was reviewed. The policy offers guidance to teachers on the type of tasks which are appropriate as homework and makes particular reference to work to be learned. This is commended since revision of newly-acquired aspects of language is an integral part of the language-acquisition process. Many teachers spent some time at the beginning of class checking and correcting homework and this was very worthwhile.

Samples of student work were examined. It was evident that work is being monitored and in some cases marks were awarded for the standard of the work. Some teachers gave helpful feedback to students about ways to improve the quality of their work. It is strongly recommended that this practice be extended and especially that students would be assess the standard of their own work. This approach is considered constructive because it will allow students to critically examine their own work against a criterion that has been clearly set out for them. This is another of the skills involved in independent learning which should be developed in all students.

Teachers maintain their own record of student attendance and results. Results of house examinations are recorded on the *e-portal* system and reports are sent home at recognised times during the school year. Parent – teacher meetings are held also for each year group once a year.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish enjoys a high status in the school.
- A wide range of modern aids and resources is available to teachers.
- The value of continuing professional development is recognised.
- A broad programme of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities supports the teaching and learning of Irish.
- Teachers are active in the subject development process.
- The comprehensiveness of individual teacher planning was noted.
- A wide range of stimulating resources has been collated on the school's intranet.
- Teachers had extensively prepared for their lessons.
- Teachers showed a good understanding the needs of the learners in their care and an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration prevailed in all lessons observed.
- In a good number of classes independent learning was being promoted.
- Irish was the primary language in use in the lessons observed.
- Questioning was used effectively.
- On the whole, a wide range of activities was set for students.
- Recognition of all the language skills is included in the assessment system.

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

- A review of how students are allocated to class groups is recommended.
- It is recommended that common schemes of work be set out for each year group.
- It is recommended that more extensive use be made of interactive learning tasks which require students to take a more central role in lesson activities.

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

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Pobalscoil na Tríonóide Youghal welcomes the report following the subject inspection of Irish in the school September 2010.

We note the findings relating to:

- The 'high status' Irish enjoys in the school.
- The wide range of modern aids and resources available to teachers.
- Recognition given to 'the value of continuing professional development'.
- A broad programme of extra curricular and co-curricular activities supports the teaching and learning of Irish.
- Teachers are active in the subject development process.
- The comprehensiveness of individual teacher planning was noted.
- A wide range of stimulating resources has been collated on the school's intranet.
- Teachers had extensively prepared for their lessons.
- Teachers showed a good understanding of the needs of learners in their care and an atmosphere of co-operation and collaboration prevailed in all lessons observed.
- In a good number of classes independent learning was being promoted.
- Irish was the primary language in use in the lessons observed.
- Questioning was used effectively.
- On the whole, a wide range of activities was set for students.
- Recognition of all the language skills is included in the assessment system.

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

Since the Report was issued for response, we have reviewed how students are allocated to class groups.

We will continue to promote the use of interactive tasks which require students to take a more central role in lesson activities. The school is committed to achieving common schemes of work for each year group.