An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Rice College
Ennis, County Clare
Roll number: 61910K

Date of inspection: 22 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rice College. 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 the teachers of Irish.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

There are seven teachers involved in teaching Irish in the school at present and their experience of teaching the language is varied. Such variety of experience is beneficial as it creates opportunities for integrating emerging methodologies with long-established approaches. Nonetheless, it is noted that not all of these teachers possess the appropriate qualifications. It is strongly recommended that the school management should ensure that every teacher is properly qualified.

Generally speaking, the majority of the teachers are given opportunities of teaching Irish at the various levels within the different programmes. This is worthwhile and it is recommended that, as a general policy, all teachers would get regular experience of teaching Irish in the different programmes and at the various levels.

The school timetable supports the teaching and learning of Irish in that the students are afforded regular contact with the target language. This amounts to daily contact in the case of fifth and sixth year, three class periods per week for Transition Year (TY) and four class periods per week for junior-cycle students.

First year and TY classes are of mixed-ability. Second and third-year students are divided into mixed-ability classes within higher-level and ordinary-level bands. Fifth and sixth-year students who follow the higher-level course are streamed according to their ability. A mixed-ability band exists for students of the ordinary-level course. It is recommended that the manner in which the students of Irish are assigned to classes should be reviewed. First of all, it is recommended that the system of streaming which applies in the case of students undertaking the higher-level Leaving Certificate course should be discontinued. These students should be divided into mixed-ability classes, an approach which would be more in keeping with school policy. As well as that, it is recommended that the benefits that would accrue from having mixed-ability classes in all the junior-cycle year groups, and particularly in second year, be considered.

Thirty-eight students have exemption from the study of Irish. This figure equates with six per cent of the total student cohort. Thirty-two of these students have learning difficulties and the others
are students who received their early education outside of the state. Where appropriate and possible, an effort is made to provide learning-support classes for students with exemptions while the Irish lessons are in progress.

The management is aware of the importance of continuing professional development and every effort is made to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their professional skills. Most recently, all received an input regarding the potential of various learning activities which have come to the fore in recent years. In addition, teachers have attended the in-service workshops being organised at present by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) in Irish. Special praise goes to those teachers who are committed to broadening their range of teaching strategies. Particular note was taken of those teachers who were clearly putting an emphasis on the fostering of strategies which create opportunities for interaction and collaborative learning.

The teachers of Irish have designated classrooms, an arrangement which facilitates the storage of equipment and resources. Many teachers have endeavoured to create a stimulating learning environment in the classrooms by hanging charts on the walls. As well as vocabulary lists, proverbs and points of grammar, some teachers have put samples of students’ work on display. This is commendable as it is a source of pride for students that their work is given such recognition and it is for this reason that it is recommended that the practice should be further extended. There is a computer, a data projector, a screen and CD-player available in each classroom. The way in which the rooms are equipped, making it possible for teachers to regularly and seamlessly integrate the use of information and communication technology (ICT) into lesson activities was noted.

The school is located in an area where Irish culture enjoys a high status, particularly Irish music. This brings about a positive attitude towards Irish among the general public and, as a result, there is an active branch of Conradh na Gaeilge in the town of Ennis. This provides strong support for the promotion of extracurricular activities in the school. Among the activities embarked upon during the school year are competitions for first-year students such as a quiz and designing Christmas cards. Other year groups are brought on trips to plays, to the Gaeltacht and to heritage centres. It was indicated that Seachtain na Gaeilge is a major event in the school calendar, during which an extensive range of activities is organised in collaboration with Conradh na Gaeilge, which also organises Féile na hInse at the same time. A new initiative undertaken this year was a penpal scheme between the first-year student in the school and those in another school in the area. This particular initiative is especially beneficial in that it will serve to foster the students’ communicative skills. A further advantage associated with it is that it conveys to students that Irish is a living language which can be spoken to their fellow students and friends. As a further indication of the positive attitude towards Irish being cultivated by the school, it is recommended that a little Irish would be incorporated into any publication or correspondence emanating from the school.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject-development planning is being promoted at a whole-school level and the teachers of Irish welcome the opportunities which the process creates for them to come together on a formal basis. The same person acts as co-ordinator from year to year. It is suggested that it would be better if this appointment were to be made on a rotating basis. Minutes of the meetings showed that, as well as administrative matters, issues such as examinations, homework practices and the acquisition of resources are also discussed. The effort being made to implement common
practices is commended, particularly in relation to assessment methods. As the plan for Irish is developed, it is recommended that agreed practices regarding the use of Irish in class should be devised. In discussing these practices, it would be worthwhile for teachers to identify basic strategies which support the communicative approach and which ensure that students practice the four language skills regularly and in a balanced way.

General yearly plans have been drawn up which guide the teachers when devising schemes of work for their own class groups. Much of the content of the plans relates to the tasks to be completed in the state examinations. Greater benefit would be derived from plans based on the content of the syllabuses for the various programmes. Furthermore, the development of common schemes of work for each year group would result in more effective planning. Not alone could the content of common examinations be included in these schemes as part of the specified assessment methods, but it is thought that it would alleviate somewhat the burden of individual planning on teachers. In developing such plans, it would also be expected, not only that there would be a clear link between the common schemes and the topics specified in the relevant syllabuses, but also that a particular emphasis would be placed on the development of students’ communicative skills.

As regards the TY plan, praise is due for the effort made to give the students an alternative experience of learning Irish by organising debates, trips and workshops. It is thought that many other possibilities exist to implement an even more functional programme, by placing a greater emphasis on the practical use of language during the Irish lessons themselves. It would be worthwhile for teachers to consider the advantage to be gained by laying out the TY programme in the form of Transition Units. This is an approach being advocated at present by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and it is thought that placing an emphasis on skills such as information processing, and on critical and creative thinking, would be of great benefit to the students.

Teachers have received some input regarding innovative learning activities which would be worth trialling during lessons. The number of suggested activities is significant and it is recommended to the Irish department that it should select one or two activities that could be developing during a term. The implementation and effectiveness of these activities could be discussed at departmental meetings.

On the whole, the quality of individual planning was satisfactory in that teachers prepared a range of tasks as well as resources which assisted students in the completion of these tasks. Good practice was observed where it was planned that students would undertake a range of tasks which created opportunities for them to practise and re-practise the new aspects of language acquired. The practice was better still where the use of interactive tasks provided students with the opportunity to practise various communicative skills. It is recommended that each teacher would identify in advance the aspects of language to be practised by students during a lesson. Based on this information, they should then devise a range of tasks which require the students to practise the newly-acquired language in interactive ways which ensure that they make progress in the four language skills.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Five Irish lessons were observed during the inspection. In general, the standard of teaching and learning seen in the course of these lessons was satisfactory. In some cases, excellent practice was
observed and the recommendations in this section are set down with a view to having this good practice extended.

Irish was the language in use in many of the classes observed in that, for the most part, teachers spoke to the students in Irish. It was apparent that some students were accustomed to this practice and in these cases the students understood the teacher’s questions and followed the instructions given without difficulty. Note was taken also of these students’ competence in Irish and of their willingness to take advantage of the opportunities created for them to speak Irish. However, in other cases, it was clear that the students had had no experience of basic communication during class being conducted through the medium of Irish, and accordingly they and their teachers often had to resort to English. It is strongly recommended that Irish be the main language of communication for teachers and students during Irish lessons. With this in mind, exemplars of meta-language such as common sentences and questions should be put on display in the classrooms. In addition, time needs to be devoted early in first year to establishing the practice, by involving students in activities which require them to listen to one another and to the teacher speaking Irish. These activities should foster in them the confidence to use Irish as the normal medium of communication during Irish lessons. The implementation of this approach is greatly dependent on the teachers’ own confidence in their ability in Irish, and it is strongly recommended that all teachers be capable of speaking Irish fluently.

At the beginning of a class, some of teachers indicated to the students what activities were to be undertaken during that class. This practice is commended as it indicates to students that specific objectives are to be attained. This approach could be further developed by sharing the desired learning outcomes with students at the beginning of class. In this way, the students would understand what the outcomes of their participation should be.

In the great majority of classes observed the activities embarked upon were well-varied. These activities were linked thematically, and this created opportunities for students to practise and re-practise the newly-taught elements of the language. Good practice was seen where students were set to completing a balanced mix of individual and interactive tasks. It was in these cases that students were given the most practice at speaking Irish and it was clear that this was one of the aspects of the class which most appealed to them. A further advantage gained from interactive tasks was that every student took an active part in the class activities. It is strongly recommended that each teacher would set his/her students tasks which would give them practice at communicating orally with one another.

Among the resources utilised were work sheets, video clips, diagrams, text books and flash cards. Those teachers who accessed and designed stimulating resources which facilitated learning are to be commended. Particular note was taken of the effective use made by some teachers of ICT to show diagrams and video clips to students, an approach which greatly encouraged them to in undertake lesson activities.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school has a homework policy which guides many of the practices implemented by the teachers of Irish. It is good that the teachers have agreed guidelines as regards the amount of time which the students of the various year groups should spend at homework. It is also praiseworthy that some teachers consistently devote time to checking homework during class. Indeed, in one case, the home exercise was used effectively to develop the lesson by building on prior learning.
When future discussions are taking place on possible homework tasks, teachers should keep in mind the importance of allocating items to be learned by students and of checking them on a regular basis.

In a small number of cases, teachers used questioning to assess the students’ understanding of the newly-taught subject matter. This strategy is helpful in measuring the effectiveness of learning, as it gives an indication to the teacher, and of course to the student, of the standard being achieved. The use made by these teachers of differentiated questions was noted. This worthwhile practice ensured a positive experience of learning Irish for students.

Samples of students’ written work were reviewed. In many instances, an extensive range of tasks had been completed by students and it was apparent that these were being regularly monitored by the majority of teachers. The emphasis placed on self-assessment in certain instances was noted and praise is due to those teachers who required that students would critically read their own work. The attention of all teachers is drawn to the importance of ensuring that students correct mistakes they make in their own work and to benefits of feedback on the quality of their work, in preference to awarding a grade or writing a one-word comment. Further information on formative assessment may be found at www.ncca.ie.

Other methods of assessment include the monitoring of participation in class, class tests and in-house examinations. These mostly involve written examinations and aural tests. At present, it is only the sixth-year students who are examined orally. Following changes to the allocation of marks for the oral test in the certificate examinations, it is now intended that fifth-year undertake a formal oral examination. This is welcomed. Nonetheless, ways in which the assessment system would take account of the speaking abilities of all students should also be explored.

Every effort is made to keep all parties informed on the progress being made by students. Reports are sent home after the main examinations and meetings between parents and teachers are held once a year.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Management and the teachers of Irish recognise the importance of continuing professional development.
- The teachers have created a stimulating learning environment in their classrooms. They all have ready access to ICT facilities.
- A programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities supports the promotion of Irish outside of the classroom.
- The teachers are active in the subject development planning process.
- Some teachers made effective use of differentiated questioning.
- An extensive range of resources was utilised during lessons.
- Students were assigned a variety of activities which created opportunities for them to practise the newly-taught language.
- There is a system of assessment which keeps all parties informed as regards the progress being made by students.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that all Irish teachers should hold appropriate qualifications.
- It is recommended that Irish should be the main medium of communication during all Irish lessons.
- It is recommended that the way in which students of Irish are assigned to classes be reviewed.
- It is recommended that the Irish plan would be further developed and that common schemes of work would be drawn up for all year groups.
- It is recommended that the speaking abilities of all students be regularly assessed.

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