

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St. Mary's Secondary School,
Macroom, Co. Cork
Roll number: 62320R

Date of inspection: 8 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. Mary's Secondary School, Macroom. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching of Irish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over the course of a day during which the inspector visited Irish classes and observed the learning and teaching. The inspector interacted with the 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 to the teachers of Irish. 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

First-year, second-year and transition year (TY) students have four Irish classes per week. The other year-groups have five classes per week. Concurrent timetabling operates from second year onwards, an arrangement which presents opportunities for team-teaching initiatives. It also allows for teachers to teaching particular topics to various class-groups in turn. Management and teachers showed great interest in such initiatives and they are commended for their enthusiasm for innovative learning and teaching methods.

First- and second-year students are in mixed-ability classes and the other year groups are organised on a banding basis. This arrangement affords every girl an opportunity to study Irish at the highest level that suits her ability. The inspector was informed that the majority of the students study the higher-level courses, an indication of the value of the mixed-ability and banding systems in operation in the school. Indeed, the high standard of Irish of many students was noted during the inspection, another indication of the success of these systems.

Nineteen students have an exemption from the study of Irish. This figure equates to almost five percent of the total enrolment of students. Seventeen of these students are from abroad or received their early education overseas. The remaining students have learning difficulties. It is recommended that the whole school community consider ways of affording exempted students as many opportunities as possible to get a flavour of the Irish language and culture.

The teachers of Irish have their own rooms and they have worked to create a stimulating learning environment by displaying various charts on the walls. There are presses in all of these rooms, which facilitates storage of folders and resources. At present the desks in these rooms are laid out in rows and this inhibits communication between students. It is recommended that, in so far as it is possible, the desks be arranged in a semi-circle or as three sides of a rectangle, so students can see each other. A further advantage of such a layout is that it would allow the teacher to position herself among the students when questioning or monitoring them.

The school is located relatively close to a Gaeltacht area and it was reported that many of the students and other members of the school community have a great affinity for Irish and for aspects of Irish culture such as music, dancing and story-telling. Indeed, the mission statement of the department of Irish refers to the responsibility of the teachers of Irish to develop their students' competence in the language so that they can play a worthwhile part in Gaeltacht life. It was surprising, therefore, that very little Irish was on display throughout the school or in the various school publications. This problem was discussed in detail with the management and with the Irish teachers and a range of ways in which a stronger Irish atmosphere could be created were suggested. For example, the events organised for *Seachtain na Gaeilge* could be expanded, by organising a *Lá Gaeilge* regularly. It is also recommended that cross-curricular activities be further developed.

There is a computer and data projector in many of the classrooms and it was indicated that teachers are gradually changing their approaches so as to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the activities of Irish lessons. There is a language laboratory in the school and it was reported that students are brought there regularly to focus on accuracy of pronunciation and to give them a further taste of ways how the use of ICT can be integrated into learning Irish.

The management and teachers recognise the importance of continuous professional development (CPD) as a means of developing their teaching skills. Teachers always welcome opportunities of attending various CPD seminars. The ongoing emphasis, on the development of teachers' ICT skills, is a whole-school initiative and ICT workshops are delivered to all staff by a colleague. It is a great benefit to teachers to have such specialist knowledge available within the school's own community. Guest-speakers visit the school to give guidance on the implementation of Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies. The intention is for this particular aspect of the professional development of the whole staff to be further developed and this is welcomed because it creates many possibilities for the promotion of communication among students. Modern-language teachers have received training in the use of the language laboratory equipment and the teachers of Irish have attended workshops organised by the Second-Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. The openness of the teachers of Irish to such educational developments is commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning is an integral part of the teachers' work. The subject development planning process was formally initiated some years ago, but it is evident that the teachers have worked collaboratively for a long time. They meet regularly to discuss various matters and each teacher conveyed their appreciation of the support of their colleagues regarding effective classroom strategies. This collaboration is commended. The minutes of the meetings indicate other items of discussion: work schemes, allocation of students to classes, use of resources such as ICT, assessment and the content of in-service workshops.

The accuracy of the Irish used in the planning documentation was noted, as was the clear understanding indicated of how best to facilitate language acquisition. This plan is a valuable reference for newly-appointed teachers of Irish or for substitute teachers, because it gives a comprehensive view of the work done in relation to Irish. Among the documents seen there were an outline of general objectives and specific aims, a report on CPD events, general information on students with special educational needs, an account of cross-curricular initiatives, a list of resources, information on recording and reporting methods and schemes of work. The manner in which opportunities are availed of to discuss various topics relevant to the students' own lives during TY was noted.

The work the teachers have done up to now on devising a scheme of work for the various year-groups studying the different programmes is commended. When developing these schemes further, it would be advisable to draft a long-term overall plan - based on syllabus topics - that would indicate the links between the learning programmes undertaken by students in the different year-groups. Such a plan would inform teachers of students' prior knowledge before embarking on various topics.

It was evident that the teachers had made thorough preparation for the lessons observed. They all had thought about the various stages of the lessons as well as the resources necessary to implement those stages. In one case it was clear that the teacher has spent time beforehand considering the aspects of language to be practised during class activities. This practice indicates a clear understanding of how best to facilitate effective language acquisition and it is highly commended. The teachers had planned a variety of learning activities. There was some variety in lesson activities planned. General discussion and question-answer sessions were most common. It is recommended that when planning lesson activities in future, teachers should ensure that a more balanced weighting is given to the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

The correction of homework was one of the first activities in every lesson observed. Typically it involved the correction of reading-comprehension tests and many teachers called on individual students to write the answer on the whiteboard. It is a good idea to spend time correcting homework because it reminds students of what they already know about a topic before acquiring new, but related, elements of language. The emphasis that one teacher placed on recording an accurate version of the answer on the whiteboard was noted, as was the way that points of accuracy arose from this. Teaching grammar on an integrated basis like this is considered best practice because students get a better understanding of the rule when they see it applied.

In one case the teacher conducted an open discussion with the students at the start of class. The students were very keen to share stories/news with the class and their ability to express themselves through the medium of Irish was impressive. Students become accustomed to procedures like this and it is commended that students' oral language skills are promoted in this manner.

Irish was to the fore in all classes observed. Teachers spoke only in Irish to their students and the majority of the students had a good understanding of what the teacher was saying. It was mainly through questioning and pair-work that opportunities were created for students to speak Irish. Most of the students made a good attempt to answer the teacher's questions in Irish. It was noticed, however, that teachers frequently accepted one-word answers from students. Teachers are requested to adopt the policy of only accepting full sentences as answers, even from students of lower abilities. They are also reminded of the importance of 'wait time' when they are questioning students: that is, allowing the student sufficient time to recall the necessary information, to compose an answer, and convey it.

The students undertook pair-work enthusiastically and it is therefore recommended that even greater use be made of this strategy as a way of developing students' listening, speaking and cooperative skills. Teachers are reminded of the value of providing for short periods of intercommunication throughout the lesson. Not only will this encourage continuous student participation, but it will also establish the communicative approach as the main methodology used during Irish classes.

Resources in use included textbooks, a data projector, worksheets, the whiteboard and illustrations. In one case, effective use was made of gestures to convey a meaning without resorting to the use of English. Some examples of idioms were on display in classrooms. It is recommended that lists of idioms be compiled and displayed on charts, according as those phrases are practised and acquired in class. This list would function as a reference aid for students, especially when they are communicating in class. Some teachers used ICT resources. Their efforts to provide learning experiences linked to the technological world in which the students live are commended. It would be worth building on this practice, by providing as many opportunities as possible for the students to use ICT. The students themselves will have many more suggestions in this regard and, therefore, it would be worth consulting them on ways in which authentic and modern material could be used as learning and teaching aids.

ASSESSMENT

There is an account in the plan for Irish of the assessment and reporting methods used. Among the methods used to measure students' progress are oral testing in class, correction of written homework, monitoring of class work, house exams, mock exams and oral exams.

The practice of directing students towards ascertaining the correct versions of sentences containing inaccuracies was noted and is commended. Also commended are the references in the plan to feedback, especially feedback concerning written exercises. Students had completed a notable number of written exercises and the work was monitored on an on-going basis.

At present, continuous assessment is mainly in operation in TY. It is recommended that this method of assessment be more widely used and teachers are reminded of the benefit of awarding marks to every student for their continuous efforts to speak Irish. This recommendation is made in particular in the light of the upcoming changes to the allocation of marks for the oral component of the certificate examinations.

The implementation of various Assessment for Learning strategies is being explored at a whole-school level. As an initial step, the teachers of Irish are specifying homework for the night at the outset of class. On the whole, they consider this an effective strategy, but they feel that it doesn't suit every learning context. The teachers are commended for their continuous efforts to develop the students' experience of learning and of assessment. Another Assessment for Learning strategy that could be worth trying is the practice of sharing the desired learning outcomes with the students at the start of each lesson. This strategy is suited to language-students in particular, because it gives them an understanding of what they should be able to say or do if they take an active part in the lesson. When this practice is established, it could be enhanced, for example by assigning self-assessment tasks to the students at pre-arranged times.

Parents are kept informed of students' progress in various ways. The school diary is used to write notes and to keep a record of exam results. School reports are sent home after the main exams. As well as this, parent-teacher meetings are held once a year.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The students have a good standard of Irish.
- The mixed-ability and banding systems ensure the holistic development of students.
- There is an appreciation of the importance of continuous professional development.
- The teachers of Irish co-operate effectively with one another.
- The teachers had made good preparation for the classes observed.
- Irish was to the fore in the classes observed.
- A variety resources was used.
- Opportunities were created for students to speak Irish.
- Situations were created for students to practise communicating with one another.
- There is an assessment system in operation which keeps all partners informed of the progress 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 Irish be displayed more widely throughout the school and in school publications.
- It is recommended that further opportunities be created for students to speak Irish during classes.
- It is recommended that formal recognition be given to every student's ability in oral Irish.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.