An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Christian Brothers School
Tramore, County Waterford
Roll number: 64923L

Date of inspection: 7 February 2011

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 Christian Brothers School, Tramore. 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 in the course of one day, during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed the teaching and learning. 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 subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the inspection, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix otothis report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In CBS, Tramore, students are allocated to mixed-ability classes for Irish in first year. They are then divided into two higher-level classes and one ordinary-level class at the start of second year, according to the results of the summer tests taken in first year. There are four third-year classes in the school this year – an ordinary-level class, a higher-level class, a mixed class of ordinary- and higher-level students and a small foundation-level class. It is not the norm in the College to have a separate foundation-level class, but a group of third-year students was identified this year as needing such an arrangement; the school management is commended for providing this extra support. Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school and therefore there is just one mixed-ability group at that level, an arrangement which accords with the philosophy of Transition Year. There is one higher level and two ordinary-level classes in fifth and sixth year. The number of fifth-year students taking higher level Irish this year is fairly satisfactory and it is recommended that every effort be made to encourage all of those students to attempt higher level in the Leaving Certificate exam next year.

Provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory, with four class-periods per week in first and second year and five periods per week in third year. Fifth and sixth year students also have five class-periods per week. Three class-periods are provided for TY students and it is recommended that the school management consider the possibility of providing an extra class-period for that year group. It is difficult to offer a continuous stimulating programme in TY within the constraints of three class-periods per week.

Six teachers are responsible for the teaching of Irish in the school. One teacher takes almost every higher-level Irish class in the school at present. It is strongly recommended that all levels and year groups be rotated among all the qualified teachers, so that every teacher is afforded the opportunity of teaching Irish at every level.

Of the total enrolment of 492 students in the school, sixty-four have exemptions from the study of Irish. Seventeen exemptions have been granted to students who were educated abroad until the age of eleven or older. The remaining forty seven exemptions have been granted to students with learning difficulties.

Considerable efforts are made in the school to extend and promote the students' experience of Irish as a living language beyond the formal classes. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is celebrated by organising a range of events, for example, an art competition, a hurling blitz, a table quiz and a variety of games. A visiting dramatist comes to the school to organise a drama workshop with TY students. It was reported that the students are encouraged to watch TG4 and listen to Raidio na Gaeltachta by setting homework based on specific programmes. The teachers' efforts in organising events and occasions to stimulate students' interest in learning the language are commended. It is recommended, however, that what has been already achieved be further developed and that a programme of extra-curricular and co-curricular events be planned and prgressed for the whole school-year.

An annual budget is available to purchase materials and resources for the teaching and learning of Irish. It is necessary to augment the amount of resources used in the school as an aid to teaching the language. It is recommended that the teachers discuss their requirements for the next couple of years and submit a plan for the purchase of resources to the principal. It is recommended that a inventory of resources for the teaching of Irish be compiled and that it form part of the plan for Irish. The resources should be available at a central location in the school so that all the teachers would have ready access to them.

It was reported that a certain number of students go to the Gaeltacht every year, but no precise figure was available on the day of the evaluation. It is also recommended that parents be informed about summer courses in Irish which are available locally and further from home, in the Gaeltacht or otherwise. It is necessary to remind both students and their parents of the benefits of such courses. It is recommended that parents be formally made aware of imminent changes in the state exams in Irish and of the extra emphasis to be placed on oral competence in the language.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teachers of Irish meet as a group once a term, or more frequently if a particular matter arises which needs to be discussed. Minutes of these meetings are recorded in Irish. The minutes indicate that the following were the main subjects for discussion among the teachers at the meetings: textbooks, allocation of students to appropriate classes, the TY trip, a stage show, *Seachtain na Gaeilge* and the new Leaving Certificate course.

One teacher is nominated as co-ordinator of planning for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. The main responsibilities of the co-ordinator are: chairing meetings, acting as secretary to the department of Irish in the school, helping newly-recruited teachers as necessary, organising planning, as well as sourcing and storing resources. The practice of rotating the responsibilities of co-ordinator among the teachers of Irish is commended, because it offers all teachers the opportunity of playing a leadership role in planning for Irish and generally promoting the language in the school.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school was made available during the evaluation. The general plan includes an overall plan for the department of Irish itself which gives information on the objectives of the department, its aims, information on the assignment of students to individual classes, allocation of time, cross-curricular activities and reference to the

general use of resources for teaching the language. The second part of the plan comprises schemes of work for the different year-groups and levels. The work done by the Irish-teaching staff on planning in general is commendable, especially in view of the fact that the principal mentioned that planning work is a relatively recent practice in the school. It is necessary to update the plan continually from year to year. An appropriate start might be to provide more data in the general section of the plan on the specific aims and objectives of the department itself as distinct from those taken from the syllabuses. It is also recommended that the schemes of work be developed, to include information not merely on the content to be covered, but also on the teaching methodologies and resources to be used and the learning outcomes expected. Information should also be provided on the use of ICT in the teaching of Irish.

A plan was made available on the day of the evaluation, for the teaching of Irish in Transition Year. This plan looks stimulating and attractive and good aims and objectives are presented. One Transition Year class was observed during the evaluation and it was felt that the content and approach accorded totally with the aims and objectives mentioned above; this is commended. There is a dearth of information in the plan, however, about what exactly the students will be doing month by month. It is recommended that a more precise scheme of work be mapped out, indicating exactly what teaching methods, active learning methodologies and teaching resources will be used throughout the year. The students will be unable to spend a weekend in the Gaeltacht this year due to the economic downturn, but the teachers intend to organise a day-trip to a Gaeltacht area, in order to give the students a taste of the language and heritage of that area. The teachers' commitment to this venture is commended.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Genuine efforts were made to use Irish as the language of management, teaching and interaction in all the classes observed. The teachers' commitment to using the target language is commended, but it was felt that too much use was made of translation during certain lessons, where it was not necessary. It is recommended that the teachers discuss this issue and agree a policy on the use of the target language and the avoidance of unnecessary use of translation.

Good classroom activities, such as pair-work, were used in some of the classes observed. In a few cases the pair-work was used as a stimulus for use of the target language between students and that approach succeeded, up to a point. On the whole, however, the pair-work was not effective from the point of view of encouraging students to talk to each other in Irish. It is essential that the majority of these activities result in the students having to speak to or ask questions of one another in the target language. It is recommended that the teachers use a wide range of classroom activities, including pair-work, group-work, games and role-play. It is recommended that pages and worksheets containing questions and answers be distributed to students, in cases where they lack the fluency needed to communicate in the target language on their own initiative. It is important to ensure that students get opportunities to communicate in Irish during classes, on a regular basis.

In general, there was a good working atmosphere in the classes observed. The teachers circulated around the classroom, talking to students, ensuring that tasks set were being accomplished and correcting homework. There was a good relationship between the students and teachers and discipline was very good. The students worked quietly, doing their best, in the vast majority of the classes observed.

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in some of the classes observed was commended. In one case very effective use was made of ICT to illustrate the subject-matter of the lesson, to show a short film and to present notes on various authors. In other cases, however, ICT could have been used more effectively to stimulate and maintain students' interest in the subject-matter on hand. ICT resources are newly available in the school and the teachers are commended for their efforts in acquainting themselves with the use of the new technology. It is recommended that the planning for the use of ICT be continued, as well as the professional development of the teachers themselves in that area. Courses in the use of ICT in the Irish-language classroom are being made available by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish, in education centres throughout the country. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish reflect on accessing one of these courses in order to further augment their skills in this area.

The use made of a certain amount of aids and resources during Irish classes is commended, among them being ICT, worksheets, the whiteboard and a film-clip. It is recommended, however, that a far broader range of resources and interesting materials be used in class, to develop and nurture students' interest in learning the language. The use of music, photographs, film-clips, podcasts, television programmes and posters helps to stimulate students' interest in the subject and to contextualise the content of the lessons for the students, especially in relation to literature in Irish.

Where a considerable amount of time was spent in writing verbs on the whiteboard for the students to transcribe them into their copybooks, this is not an effective use of time provided for the teaching of Irish. It is recommended that this practice be replaced by the use of grammar-cards in junior classes and in ordinary-level classes, and by the use of grammar textbooks in senior higher-level classes. It is also recommended that dictionaries be available in the classrooms and that they be used regularly. It would be worth demonstrating the use of the on-line dictionary www.focal.ie for the students, in class, now that the ICT facilities are available; they should be reminded from time to time to use the website both in class and at home.

The use of sport and sports personalities to develop students' interest in lesson content is commended. For students who are not interested in sport, reference should be made to other pastimes, for example, music. A variety of learning activities was used in many of the classes observed and accordingly there was a good pace to the lessons. Teachers must ensure, however, that the activities are taken in the correct order, so that the students get the maximum benefit from the learning.

ASSESSMENT

In-school examinations are organised twice a year, at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent to parents after those tests. Contact with parents is also maintained by using the school diary, through parent-teacher meetings and through reports on students' progress as appropriate.

'Mock' oral exams are conducted for all sixth-year students, a praiseworthy approach. The intention this year is that the two post-primary schools in the town exchange teachers of Irish to conduct 'mock' oral exams for each others' students. This is a good idea which will give students the opportunity of speaking Irish to strangers. It is recommended, however, that oral exams be organised for all students in the school, starting with first-years. It is suggested that the results of the oral exam be presented as a separate item in the reports sent to parents twice a year. Both students and parents should be made aware of the importance of oral Irish from the outset.

There was plenty of student work in many of the copybooks examined during the evaluation. In certain cases the work had been carefully corrected, with references to the standard of the work and a grade or mark awarded. This is good practice. In other cases, however, it was difficult to distinguish between the teacher's corrections and amendments made by the students themselves. It would be advisable for the teacher to agree on good practice regarding a common system of correction that would ensure that the students learn from their mistakes.

The number of students taking higher-level Irish in the Junior Certificate shows considerable fluctuation in recent years. Achievement in examinations could also be better. The number of students taking higher-level Irish in the Leaving Certificate is steady but pretty low, in recent years. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish and the school management discuss these problems, with a view to increasing the numbers of students taking higher-level Irish in the state exams and improving their performance. The suggestions made in this report should help in achieving these targets.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory in the case of Junior Cycle and fifth and sixth year.
- The teachers are commended for their efforts to broaden students' experience of Irish as a living language beyond the classroom.
- The work completed to date on planning for teaching and learning is commended.
- In the lessons observed, great efforts were made to use Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication.
- There was a good working atmosphere in the classes observed and discipline was good.
- In a few classes observed, admirable use was made of ICT and of film, which added considerably to students' understanding of the subject-matter of the lesson.

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

- It is strongly recommended that school management rotate the various levels and age-groups in the school among all the qualified teachers of Irish.
- It is recommended that parents be made formally aware of imminent changes concerning Irish in the state examination system and the extra emphasis to be placed on competence in oral Irish.
- It is recommended that the teachers of Irish agree a policy on avoiding the use of translation from Irish to English.
- It is recommended that more opportunities for communication in the target language be created for students in their Irish classes.
- It is recommended that a broader range of materials and resources be used to make the content of the Irish lessons more interesting and relevant for the students.
- It is recommended that all students in the school take an annual oral examination.

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

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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 CBS Tramore welcomes the very positive report on the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. It reflects the excellent tradition and provision of the teaching of Irish in the school and the high standards of the Irish Dept. The report was fair and balanced and is a comprehensive overview of the quality of teaching and learning of Irish in the school. In particular the Board welcomes the generous acknowledgement of the warm and disciplined relationship between students and teachers in the school. The Board of Management wishes to congratulate the Principal and the teaching staff of the Irish Dept.

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

The Board of Management will continue to provide the necessary support and resources that will facilitate the Principal and staff in the implementation of the findings and recommendations given the resources available to it.

The Board welcomes the recommendations and will seek to implement them as a means of building on the strengths of the Irish Department.

The Board also wishes to acknowledge the courteous and professional manner in which the inspector carried out the subject inspection and is of the opinion that the inspection process will benefit the school in its SDP.