



Looking at Irish at Junior Cycle

Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools

PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING



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Looking at Irish at Junior Cycle is a translation of the report *Ag Breathnú ar an nGaeilge sa tSraith Shóisearach*. Some of the quotations from original reports, articles and other publications cited in this document appeared originally in Irish but have been translated for inclusion in this English version of the report.

Foreword

This composite report provides a summary and interpretation of individual subject inspection reports on Irish at junior cycle in 75 second level schools, representing 10% of all second level schools. The reports relate to the 2004-2005 school year, a time prior to the publication of school inspection reports.

These subject inspection reports contain much positive commentary, and provide affirmation for the work of students of Irish and their teachers. However, the reports also draw attention to aspects of the teaching of the subject that require improvement. In particular, inspectors raised concerns regarding teaching and learning practices in a number of the reports. It is from these concerns that the recommendations in this report arise. Many of the recommendations are designed to assist teachers to implement best practice in the classroom.

This report appears at a time of public engagement with significant changes in the status of Irish nationally and internationally, and when issues relating to Irish in post-primary education are being discussed by educationalists and the general public. I hope that by presenting this analysis of the strengths and challenges that exist in the teaching of Irish in junior cycle, the Inspectorate will also help to inform this important public debate.



Gearóid Ó Conluain
Deputy Chief Inspector



Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Aims

The main aims of this report are to:

- present an evaluation of the current quality of the teaching and learning of Irish at junior cycle as found in the second level schools of the country generally, based on the observations of practices in a representative sample of schools
- identify and draw attention to the best practice observed in the course of that work
- advise schools and teachers regarding the promotion of improved methods in the teaching and learning of Irish at junior cycle.

It should be noted that an assessment of the individual achievements of students is not included as part of the Subject Inspection process, and that therefore the matter is not discussed in this report. Attention is drawn to the reports of the chief examiners as a guide in respect of assessment, achievement and rates of participation at the three levels in the Junior Certificate Irish examination.

This report relates to the junior cycle only, in order to focus on the earliest communicative syllabus introduced for Irish at second level—a syllabus which has been in place since 1989.

1.2 Categories and types of schools

The sample of Subject Inspection reports used as the basis of this report reflected, as far as possible, the types of second-level schools within the school system.

Schools by category			
	Voluntary secondary schools	39	52%
	Vocational Education	26	35%
	Committee schools		
	Community and comprehensive schools	10	13%
	Total	75	100%

Schools by gender			
	Co-educational schools	48	64%
	Single sex schools	27	36%
	Total	75	100%

Schools by main language of instruction			
	English-medium schools	57	76%
	Irish-medium schools in Gaeltacht	12	16%
	Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht	6	8%
	Total	75	100%

1.3 Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools, and English-medium schools

The analysis of the 75 subject inspection reports demonstrated that the reports on the Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools were generally more positive than the reports on the schools where English was the main medium of instruction in the school. This was particularly so, when inspectors reported on the quality of teaching and learning.

On the whole, however, the differences between these categories of school was not significant statistically, and so it was decided not to categorise the individual reports on the basis of medium of instruction in the school when compiling this composite report. However, particular issues which were noted in Irish-medium schools are described throughout the report.

1.4 Inspection activities

A total of 320 classes, and more than 276 teachers engaged in the teaching of Irish, were visited during the course of the 75 subject inspections. The subject inspection reports were issued to the schools during the course of the 2004/05 school

year. A common code of practice was used during the subject inspections, as described in the guidebooks *A Guide to Subject Inspection at Second Level* (Inspectorate, 2004) and *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate* (Inspectorate, [2002]). The inspection activities included:

- preliminary meeting and discussion with the principal
- preliminary meeting and discussion with the teachers of Irish
- reviewing school documents in the subject
- observing Irish classes at junior cycle
- examining examples of the work of students
- reviewing school results in the certificate examinations
- feedback to the teachers individually and feedback to the teachers as a team
- feedback to the principal
- issue of the report to the school.

Quality assurance of teaching and learning forms an integral part of the work of the Inspectorate, and accordingly received special emphasis among the activities mentioned above.

1.5 Format of the report

In general, the format of this report reflects the structure of the Subject Inspection reports which examine:

- The quality of subject provision and whole-school support
- The quality of planning and preparation
- The quality of teaching and learning
- The quality of assessment

Findings and recommendations are provided at the end of each chapter, and a summary of the main findings and recommendations are available in chapter 6. It is hoped that this final chapter, and the report in general, will assist schools in their self-review process. The report will also be useful for all those interested in promoting the teaching and learning of Irish in schools.



Chapter 2

The quality of subject provision and whole-school support

2.1 Timetabling

The number of periods given to Irish on the school timetable in the course of the three years of junior cycle was examined in the subject inspections. The optimal situation for students is to have five periods per week during each of the three years of the junior cycle.

Approximately one third of schools made this provision. Another third of schools, approximately, provided four periods per week in first year and five periods per week in second and third years. A final third of schools provided a more restricted number of periods – most commonly, four periods per week over each of the three years. Where this restricted provision was noted, inspectors recommended that schools review their timetabling arrangements, in an effort to provide an extra period—particularly in higher level classes.

Features of good practice

- Students provided with five periods of Irish per week during first year, second year and third year

Concerns

- Provision of four or fewer periods per week over each of the three years of junior cycle

Inspectors also noted that account would have to be taken of the time requirements of all subjects in such a review, consistent with an appropriate recognition for Irish as a core subject on the curriculum.

2.2 Student access to the appropriate subject level

Students may study Irish and take the Junior Certificate examination in Irish at three levels: foundation level, ordinary level and higher level. Inspectors reported very favourably on the arrangements in place to ensure that students could access the subject level appropriate to their abilities and needs. The timetabling arrangement that ensured most flexibility for the students was that in which the Irish classes were timetabled concurrently in each year, particularly in second and third year.

Practice regarding the formation of classes varied. The most common pattern was to have mixed-ability classes in first year, with common written examinations at the end of first year in order to select students for the different levels in the subject in second and third years. In this arrangement, classes were grouped according to the different levels in the language (foundation level, ordinary level and higher level) from the start of the second year.

In some schools, inspectors reported that mixed-ability classes were used in first and second years, with classes grouped according to the different levels in the subject from the start of the third year. In other schools, mixed-ability classes were maintained in all three years. This final arrangement related mostly to Irish medium or Gaeltacht schools, but was not confined exclusively to those schools.

In forming classes for the subject, schools have the freedom to choose the arrangement that best suits their own situation provided that the school seeks to enable as many students as possible to attain the highest level in the language, consistent with their abilities. Inspectors recommended 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. Inspectors believed that this would enhance the self-confidence of the students in the spoken language.

In a limited number of cases, parents were consulted in deciding the level that best suited the students in terms of their abilities, needs and wishes. Inspectors noted the value of recording an agreed school policy on this issue in the school plan for the teaching of Irish.

Features of good practice

- Arrangements to ensure that students can access the subject at the level (foundation, ordinary or higher) most appropriate to their needs
- Mixed-ability classes in some or all of the junior cycle years to provide the best learning experience for students
- Concurrent timetabling of lessons in second and third year to allow students to access the level most suited to their abilities
- Parents and students consulted when deciding the level that is best suited to the abilities and needs of students

2.3 Students who have an exemption from Irish

Irish is one of the compulsory subjects in the approved course for junior cycle students prescribed in *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools* (Department of Education and Science, 2004). Circular M10/94 (Department of Education and Science, 1994) describes the circumstances in which students may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish. In summary, the circular provides that the management of a school may grant a student an exemption if the student has completed a number of years of primary education outside the State or if the student has recognised learning difficulties.

Inspectors reported that principals believed that greater pressure was being brought to bear on second-level schools concerning the approval of exemptions from Irish. Among the possible reasons for this were: an increased number of exemptions being granted in primary schools; uncertainty about an exemption from Irish in primary school being acceptable as a basis for an exemption from Irish at second level; and the numbers of students transferring from other second level schools to whom an exemption from Irish had been granted which did not accord with the provisions of Circular M10/94.

It was calculated that 6¾% of all the students in the 75 schools covered by the composite report had an exemption from Irish. Taking into account that twelve of those schools were Gaeltacht schools and that a further six schools were Irish-medium schools—where exemptions from Irish would be rare—the percentage of students with an exemption from Irish in schools in which English was the teaching medium increased to 7½%. This was a significant number of students.

Statistics available from the State Examinations Commission (State Examinations Commission, 2007) are consistent with the trends reported by inspectors concerning the increasing number of students with an exemption from Irish. These statistics show that the total numbers of students taking Irish

in the Junior Certificate examination has been lower than those taking English in each of the years 2003-2006, and that the gap between these numbers is rising – from 8% in 2003 to 11% in 2006 (see appendix). Some of the growing difference between the numbers taking English and those taking Irish may be explained by factors such as increasing numbers of students from other countries and growing numbers of students with special needs integrated in mainstream classes. However, schools should monitor carefully the way in which exemptions are granted to ensure that they are in line with the relevant circular.

Inspectors also reported on the learning arrangements made for students who had exemptions. The two groups of students for which exemptions were intended—those who have had a period of primary education abroad and those with recognised learning difficulties—are not necessarily independent of each other. However, it is clear that they would have different needs at a time when Irish was timetabled. Inspectors reported that the arrangements made for such students varied. In some cases, students with an exemption were allowed to study another subject while being seated in the timetabled Irish class or in another supervised location. These types of arrangement were generally in place for students who had had a period of primary education outside the State.

In some schools, students with recognised learning difficulties (and for whom additional teaching resources had been granted) received their learning support programme while Irish was timetabled. In other cases, schools ensured that all students with special educational needs had access to Irish and encouraged students with exemptions to study the language. Students studying the Junior Certificate Schools Programme were also encouraged to undertake Irish at foundation level.

Schools have the discretion to make arrangements that will be of greatest benefit to the students—both students in the Irish class and students with an exemption from Irish. This decision should be informed by the need to manage resources, as well the school's policy regarding the participation of students in Irish. Inspectors considered that allowing students with an exemption from Irish to study another subject while seated in the Irish class was the option least worthy of consideration, both in terms of the personal study of individual students and the dynamic of the Irish class.

Features of good practice

- Exemptions from Irish granted in line with the requirements of Circular M10/94
- Where a student has an exemption from Irish, the time available is used to ensure maximum benefit for the student
- Opportunities provided to students with an exemption from Irish (particularly students from abroad with another language or languages) to participate in Irish lessons

Concerns

- Principals concerned about the pressure on second-level schools to grant exemptions from Irish
- 6¾% of all students had an exemption from Irish; in English-medium schools this increased to 7½% of students
- Students with an exemption from Irish remaining in the classroom while Irish is taught but studying another subject - adverse effect this has on the students' learning and the dynamic in the class

2.4 Allocation of teachers

Inspectors considered that practice was better in schools in which there was an agreed policy that gave an equal opportunity to all teachers of Irish to gain experience in teaching the subject at the different levels and at both junior and senior cycle. Inspectors noted that this arrangement boosted morale among teachers of the subject and helped to promote collaborative planning in the subject. They also believed that the arrangement benefited the standing of the subject in the school.

Inspectors reported this best practice in a number of schools. They also described a range of other practices. In some schools Irish classes at junior cycle were shared by agreement among teachers. In other schools, the principal allocated teachers to teach classes at the various levels, bearing in mind past results in the Junior Certificate examinations. In some schools, the teachers nominated to teach Irish at junior cycle were those for whom the teaching of Irish was only a minor part of their teaching programme. Where teachers were reluctant to undertake the teaching of the subject at all levels, the inspectors recommended that the subject department and school management should make every effort to provide professional support to overcome the teachers' reluctance.

Features of good practice

- Equal opportunities provided to all teachers of Irish to teach the subject at different levels and at both junior and senior cycle

Concerns

- Some teachers allocated to classes on the basis of past results in the Junior Certificate examinations
- Some teachers nominated to teach Irish at junior cycle were those for whom the teaching of Irish was only a minor part of their teaching programme

2.5 Classrooms and resources to support teaching and learning

The subject inspection reports recognised the advantage of a classroom being allocated to the teacher of Irish. Inspectors noted that where teachers of Irish had a base classroom, the provision of a better range of learning resources and the creation of a stimulating environment for the teaching of Irish was more readily achieved. Where there was no particular classroom assigned to the teacher, inspectors reported that there were constraints on the ready availability of subject

resources. One report praised the arrangement in a VEC school where a whiteboard, screen, overhead projector, television, video player and CD player were available as standard in classrooms for most of the teachers of Irish. Inspectors recommended the allocation of base classrooms where possible, recognising that this would not be feasible in all schools.

Inspectors also recommended that where a school had a language laboratory, associated video and sound systems and storage areas for resources, access to these facilities should be ensured for the teaching of Irish during the planning of classroom allocations and the timetable.

Inspectors reported positively on the provision of teaching and learning resources for Irish, although few references were made in the reports to the existence of a specific school budget for teaching resources. In almost all cases, teaching resources were provided following an application to the principal.

Inspectors praised the use of portable resources such as CD and tape players which allowed teachers to record and use items of the living language from the broadcast media in the classroom. Inspectors praised the limited number of instances where such extracts were prominent in the planning

undertaken for the teaching of the subject. Some reports on Gaeltacht schools noted that the schools had access (under certain community schemes) to external tutors who came to the school in order to enrich the speaking of Irish among students.

In the case of those schools which had libraries, inspectors' reports recommended that the stock of Irish books that would be suitable as extra reading material in the language should be expanded.

Inspectors also suggested that schools should record a list of the resources available for the subject and provide a copy to all the members of the Irish department. It was also recommended that the list should be reviewed at the end of each year in order to renew and augment resources for the following year. Inspectors suggested that the stock of teaching resources would be improved most effectively by discussing those issues as part of the collaborative work—based on a review of the experience of teachers with different resources. The inspectors also considered that it would be well worth while making the resources used in the teaching of the subject, in addition to the textbooks themselves, more stimulating and varied.

Features of good practice

- Allocation of base classrooms to teachers of Irish facilitating better provision of resources and the creation of a stimulating environment for Irish
- Provision of a good range of teaching resources including computer and projector, video/tv, and CD player
- Clear arrangements for the allocation of a regular budget for the purchase and renewal of resources for teaching materials
- Recording and collection of authentic language texts (from television, radio, etc.) to support language learning
- Provision of lists of available resources to teachers to encourage their use
- In Gaeltacht schools, the use of external tutors from the community can help to enrich students' oral Irish

Concerns

- Need to make the resources available in some schools more interesting and varied
- Need to list resources and to provide lists to all teachers
- Need to review available resources following discussion among teachers
- Where a language laboratory is available, access to the laboratory should be timetabled for the teaching of Irish

2.6 Information and communication technology (ICT)

The inspection reports on which this report is based relate to the period immediately before broadband was being made widely available in schools. Access to ICT facilities for the teaching of Irish was reported only in a small range of schools, on account of the other demands placed on the ICT room (or rooms). The Transition Year was frequently mentioned as a group to whom priority was given concerning the provision of ICT facilities.

It emerged clearly from the reports that very little use was made of ICT in the teaching of Irish or in the planning for the subject. Very few reports referred to ICT as part of the teaching of Irish. In certain cases praise was given to the work done by teachers in copying authentic texts of the written language from certain websites associated with Irish for use in class. Even in those limited cases students had no hands-on experience of using that technology themselves in order to access material in Irish.

It was frequently recommended in the reports that schools should review the possibilities that could arise from including an ICT item on the teaching programme at junior cycle. An

exceptional example was observed where a computer that was connected to the internet was available in the classrooms for Irish. In that case the computer was in use as an integrated tool in the teaching and learning of the language with access by students to it all the time, under the direction of the teacher. This was just one model of the possibilities arising from the use of ICT in the Irish class.

Another report described how a school had forged a link with an Irish-medium school in another area of the country. Such links could be promoted at the level of individual students, with students exchanging e-mail messages in Irish with other students. With the coming of broadband to schools this approach will be greatly facilitated.

Inspectors recognised that teachers needed opportunities to gain confidence in using ICT. They recommended that all teachers would avail of training opportunities to include ICT as an integrated aspect of the teaching of the language. They also recommended that students should have opportunities to experience Irish being used through the medium of ICT.

Features of good practice

- Use of ICT and the internet to obtain authentic language texts
- Use of ICT to forge links with other schools and learners of Irish

Concerns

- Very little use made of ICT in teaching and learning of Irish
- Even where ICT was in use to obtain authentic Irish-language resources, it was used by teachers exclusively
- Students did not gain any hands-on experience in using ICT themselves
- Need to ensure access to ICT resources to support the teaching of Irish
- Clear need for teachers to have training opportunities in the use of ICT

2.7 Professional development of teachers

Inspectors' reports referred to the disappointment among principals and teachers at the lack of in-service courses available for many years in regard to teaching methods in Irish—either as a first or a second language. The reports praised various forms of professional development

undertaken by specific teachers themselves, for example post-graduate qualifications obtained in areas such as Irish itself, learning support, and information and communication technology.

In one school a course was provided for teachers of Irish in teaching methods in Irish as a second language, and teachers of Irish in a number of other schools were working in conjunction with a university initiative to promote teaching and learning in an innovative way. In a limited number of cases a member of staff of the Irish department was attending a pilot scheme in the teaching of Irish organised by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). It was stated in other cases that members of the Irish department attended meetings of the Irish teachers' subject-association—*Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge*—meetings which were understood to relate mainly to guidance on aspects of the certificate examinations.

All the activities named above applied to a small minority of teachers of Irish whom the inspectors encountered during visits to schools in preparing this report. It is accepted that it is an important part of the work of the teachers of Irish to review methods of teaching and learning languages. The inspectors considered that there would be merit in teachers sharing among themselves their professional experience in regard to the teaching of the language and that it would be

worth exploring the possibilities locally of sharing the different aspects of teaching among themselves. Likewise, team-teaching could be attempted from time to time where timetable flexibility permitted.

It should be noted here that since the evaluation work on which this report is based was completed in schools, the Minister for Education and Science has appointed a special team under the aegis of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) to support the continuing professional development of teachers of Irish.

Features of good practice

- Some teachers had undertaken various forms of professional development in areas such as Irish, learning support and ICT
- A school had provided a course for its teachers on the teaching of Irish as a second language
- Some teachers were sharing their professional expertise with staffs and with teachers in other schools

Concerns

- Concern among principals and teachers regarding the lack of suitable in-service courses on the teaching of Irish over many years
- A minority of teachers had engaged in professional development activities

A national coordinator and a panel of regional development officers have been appointed. An extensive programme of support is planned and it is hoped that this will help to support teachers of the subject in implementing improved teaching and learning approaches.

2.8 Whole school policy in respect of Irish

Sections 9(f) and 9(h) of the *Education Act 1998* place certain responsibilities on schools to promote the use of Irish in the school and, in the case of Gaeltacht schools, to assist in the retention of Irish as the main community language. Where reference was made to these issues in the inspection reports, the great majority of the references were positive. In certain cases the principals themselves were teachers of Irish, who well understood the challenges relating to the teaching of Irish. In one particular case an account was given of the praise accorded by Irish teachers for the support given by the principal (who was not Irish) to Irish on the school programme. In another case attention was drawn to the support of the chief executive of a Vocational Education Committee for the promotion of Irish in the school through the provision of resources, visits to the school, and encouragement of the staff of the school.

The efforts of school management in the case of Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools to ensure the success of the school's efforts to maintain an Irish language ethos in the school were praised. It was also noted that Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools were most advanced in drafting an Irish policy for their schools with a view to ensuring priority for Irish in school activities and in supporting Irish as the main language of the community.

Features of good practice

- Boards of management in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools worked hard to ensure the success of the schools' efforts to maintain an Irish-language ethos in the schools and to assist in the retention of Irish as the main community language
- Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools were most advanced in drafting an Irish policy for their schools

2.9 Co-curricular and extracurricular activities

About a third of the reports referred to the provision of excellent co-curricular and extracurricular activities in supporting the teaching of Irish. Among the activities to which attention was most frequently drawn were visits to the school by writers in Irish or well-known personalities, local or

national, who are fluent in Irish. Some of these visits were supported by the Arts Council's scheme for writers in schools.

Students were involved in various competitions, such as debates, quizzes, creative writing, essay writing, and the making of videos – all of which provided an opportunity to practise Irish outside of the Irish class. In Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools, an emphasis was placed on gaining recognition for the students' efforts. Schools demonstrated considerable knowledge and experience of the Irish language broadcast media in this regard.

The reports often referred favourably to the efforts of schools to promote events relating to Irish in the school during *Seachtain na Gaeilge* (Irish Language Week). It is suggested that those events do not necessarily have to be organised in the month of March. There is a link between those activities and the whole-school support referred to in section 2.8 above. The most productive events are those that succeed in promoting the speaking of Irish outside the classroom or at least that direct greater attention to Irish in the form of notices and displays throughout the school. The needs of all the students can be met by means of such events.

Features of good practice

- Co-curricular activities that are used successfully to promote the teaching of Irish include:
 - o Visits to the school by writers or well known personalities fluent in Irish
 - o Debates
 - o Quizzes
 - o Creative writing
 - o Making of videos
 - o *Seachtain na Gaeilge* (Irish language week)
 - o Irish language notices and displays throughout the school



Chapter 3

The quality of planning and preparation

3.1 The planning process in schools

The subject inspection reports showed that progress was being made in the development of collaborative planning for Irish in the period. However, considerable variation in practice was noted.

Effective collaborative planning for a subject such as Irish ensures that a clear vision for the teaching of the subject is articulated and shared by all of the teaching staff. Where good collaborative planning exists, the teachers of the subject will be enabled to develop a comprehensive plan for the teaching of Irish, and the plan will be monitored and reviewed regularly. Teachers will have a shared sense of responsibility for the teaching of the subject and they will review teaching, learning and assessment targets each year in response to the learning needs of students. Excellent planning can help to ensure that students enjoy the subject and study it at the highest level best suited to their abilities.

Excellent planning is greatly facilitated when a subject co-ordinator takes responsibility for leading the process and when regular subject meetings are held. Formal recording of meetings, decisions and tasks to be completed is also necessary.

The subject inspection reports indicate that collaborative subject planning as described above has begun to be introduced in the teaching of Irish. Many of the subject inspection reports stated that a good foundation was being laid for planning or that planning had commenced. Some reports noted that the coordination of the Irish department was a post of responsibility while in other schools, this duty rotated annually among the teachers of Irish. While reports noted variations in the time allocated by school management for planning work, reports also noted subject meetings being held at the beginning and end of the school year, or at times throughout the school year. In general, about three quarters of the reports contained some favourable comments about collaborative planning in the schools.

For example, in one school, the report commented:

Although the Irish teachers meet on an informal basis, it is clear that a great deal of planning takes place in the school and the teachers are to be congratulated on the personal planning and the broad collaborative planning underway in Irish.

However, in a significant number of schools—about one quarter—the planning for Irish was confined to either individual planning by teachers or some limited form of collaborative planning. Limited planning meant in some cases

that teachers met together to discuss the concerns of the Irish department but did not seek to agree common programmes regarding the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish in junior cycle. In other cases, collaborative planning was limited to one or two years of the junior cycle. In one school, for example, it was reported that the teachers planned collaboratively for first year but not for the second or third year programme.

Leaving planning exclusively to each individual teacher—rather than seeking to have a collaborative approach in the school—has certain weaknesses. In particular, good practice cannot be shared and lack of coordination between teachers can mean that continuity of learning for students cannot be guaranteed.

The most common recommendations made by inspectors regarding planning included the following:

- to agree a comprehensive policy for Irish in the school curriculum as an aspect of the school development planning process
- to build on the good informal planning work in hand by coming together as teachers of Irish and establishing work programmes
- to initiate collaborative planning in the case of teachers who are teaching the subject at the same level.

Features of good practice

- Development of a comprehensive plan for Irish as part of the overall school plan
- Plan for Irish considers issues including the promotion of Irish in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities as well as in teaching and learning of the subject
- Teachers have a shared sense of responsibility for the teaching of the subject
- Teachers review teaching, learning and assessment targets each year
- Planning led by subject coordinator
- School management allocates adequate time for subject planning process.

Concerns

- Collaborative planning limited in significant number of schools (just over one quarter)
- Lack of opportunities for teachers to share good practice and to ensure continuity for students

3.2 The content of the school plan

The subject inspection reports commented on the quality of the content of the school planning documentation for Irish.

3.2.1 Planning consistent with syllabus aims and guidelines: Emphasis on oral skills

The syllabus for Irish, *Siollabas don Teastas Sóisearach: Gaeilge* (Department of Education and Science, [1988]) and the related publication *Gaeilge don Teastas Sóisearach: Treoirlínte do Mhuinteoirí* (NCCA, [1989]) were published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. It is recommended that these booklets should form the basis of teachers' collaborative planning rather than textbooks or examination papers.

The syllabus emphasises that the main aim of the teaching of Irish must be to develop students' ability to use the language:

The syllabus is based on the understanding that the main aim of the courses is to enable students to use Irish. (Department of Education and Science, [1988], p. 1)

Similar guidance is to be found in the related teacher guidelines where it is stated that the syllabus emphasises the use of the language, that interesting or realistic contexts

should be created for the communication scenarios of the students, and that there is a change of emphasis in the syllabus, a change from reading and writing to speaking (NCCA, p.1 and p.17)

It is clear from the inspectors' reports that in a small number of cases planning and preparation in schools was in line with the syllabus and guidelines. These schools placed appropriate emphasis on developing the speaking of Irish as one of the main skills of the language. For example, a small number of reports contained statements such as the following:

A plan was drawn up in order to develop the communication ability of the students in each year group.

Emphasis was placed in the planning on developing the ability of students to speak Irish and on fostering a positive attitude among them towards Irish and on presenting it as a living language.

However, in general, inspectors reported that, other than in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools, the speaking of Irish was not identified as a main aim in the planning of schools. Inevitably, this had consequences for the teaching methods practised in the class as part of teaching and learning. Inspectors frequently recommended that in teachers' planning and preparation, greater attention needed to be given to the main aim laid down in the syllabus and to the

change of emphasis on the role of the teacher arising from that main aim.

The implications for teachers' planning and preparation arising from the emphasis on the development of oral language contained in the syllabus are clearly laid out in the syllabus and in the accompanying guidelines. Referring to the change of emphasis in the role of the teacher of Irish that was to have resulted from the *Siollabas don Teastas Sóisearach: Gaeilge*, which came into effect in 1989, the *Teacher Guidelines* note that the teacher should become a manager of various learning activities rather than being a dispenser of information. The *Guidelines* emphasise that

The teacher must foster an atmosphere in the class in which it would be natural to use Irish. (NCCA, p. 5).

This advice has implications not only for formal lesson content but also for the general and informal use of Irish in the classroom. In order to attain the main aim of the Junior Certificate Irish syllabus, it is necessary to use Irish naturally while one is dealing with Irish as a subject in class, and in the other everyday activities of the class, as well as providing an opportunity in the class for communication in Irish. In addition, students must be encouraged to use Irish through active tasks—like group work, work in pairs, role-play, and responding to authentic items from the broadcast media.

Such approaches also promote a measure of freedom from textbooks and encourage independent learning.

The evidence in the inspection reports regarding planning and preparation suggested that schools needed to place more emphasis on developing students' spoken language as recommended in the syllabus and teacher guidelines. The reports also suggested that schools needed to plan for the use of methodologies that would provide students with opportunities to use and practise the language in Irish lessons.

3.2.2 Clarity and continuity in learning objectives

Inspectors noted that teaching, learning and assessment targets should be agreed, year by year, for the various levels in the subject and be recorded as a central part of the work schemes in the subject. They pointed out that such targets are necessary reference points in order to provide common programmes for teaching and learning. However, inspectors reported that among the most common items on the agenda for collaborative planning meetings were issues such as the selection of textbooks, the suitability of students for the various levels in the language, extracurricular activities, Irish language week activities, in-house examinations, Gaeltacht

scholarships, a common teaching programme, and resources for the subject. The need for greater focus on teaching, learning and assessment objectives was very clear.

A revised primary school Irish curriculum was introduced as part of the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999). In one subject inspection report, inspectors praised as good practice the attention that the school had paid to the objectives in the primary curriculum in order to foster continuity in children's learning:

The primary school Irish curriculum is consulted whilst planning is under way for the teaching and learning of Irish in order to create continuity between the two levels—particularly in the case of students with little or no Irish. The Irish teachers deserve great praise for this.

The inspectors noted that the aims contained in the revised *Primary School Curriculum* could provide the basis of the learning objectives that might reasonably be expected of pupils in fifth and sixth classes in the primary school. The inspectors also advised that such objectives could be used in planning any appraisal of the work of first-year students.

3.2.3 Planning for differentiated learning

The inspection reports showed that in English-medium schools, mixed-ability classes were most frequently used in the first year of junior cycle. An alternative situation obtained in the Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools, where there were mixed-ability classes in the three different years.

In order to meet appropriately the individual learning needs of new first year students, their ability in Irish—in all the main language skills—must be assessed at the outset and on an ongoing basis. The inspectors praised planning work which provided for different student abilities in the same class:

The learning needs of individual students are taken into account in the planning up to a point also - for example reading and additional tasks for students who attended Irish-medium primary schools and homework suitable for students who come into first year with little Irish.

However, where inspectors found that consideration had been given to the assessment of students' standard of Irish on their arrival in the school from primary level, the assessments concentrated mainly on the assessment of written Irish. If the aim of the syllabus is really to be achieved—that the use of Irish would have a communicative function—the assessment must be in keeping with all the teaching and learning targets.

Inspectors recommended strongly that extremely careful planning be undertaken for differentiated learning. They emphasised that the same importance be attached to the needs of each student: that the needs of the student with very little Irish must be met every bit as well as the needs of the student who displays great ability in the language. Inspectors noted that it was not sufficient to direct instruction at the average ability point of those two groups. One report stated:

.....emphasis is placed on developing the standard of Irish of students who have little or no Irish but ... students who have a good ability in Irish are not taken into account in the planning.

Considerable advantages may be gained from planning for group work, work in pairs and drama in order to meet the differentiated needs of students. The following practice, observed in an Irish-medium school, was commended by inspectors:

The ability of classes is taken into account when planning is under way and a variety of teaching methods and strategies are used for the benefit of students' learning, as in drama.

Features of good practice

- Planning informed by the syllabus and teacher guidelines for Junior Certificate Irish
- In a small number of schools, planning was consistent with the emphasis placed on the development of oral language in the syllabus
- Aims of the primary school curriculum used to inform teaching, learning and assessment so as to ensure continuity for students
- Teaching, learning and assessment targets agreed each year for the various levels in the subject
- Assessment, including assessment of oral language, used to identify students' learning needs and to form mixed-ability groups in first year
- Planning for differentiated learning to be used with mixed-ability groups

Concerns

- Planning insufficiently based on the syllabus and the accompanying teacher guidelines
- The development of oral Irish not sufficiently recognised in planning
- In general, planning in most schools focussed exclusively on specifying subject-matter of teaching

- An over-emphasis in planning on what was to be taught rather than a balanced plan for *subject content* and *how* teaching and learning was to take place
- The lack of teaching, learning and assessment targets in most planning was evident
- Teaching directed at the needs of students of average ability rather than differentiated for all ability levels
- Assessment of incoming first-year students in written Irish only

3.2.4 Planning for methodologies

Integration of language skills

A small number of the reports refer to the attention directed specifically in planning to teaching the main skills of the language in an integrated way - the most productive method recommended in respect of the teaching of skills. There is a clear and direct reference to this in the guidelines for teachers accompanying the Junior Certificate syllabus:

In any teaching unit it would be advisable to develop different language skills together ... All the skills are dependent on one another. (NCCA, p.4)

The inspectors recommended as best practice that themes should be identified in the topics mentioned in the syllabus

and that teaching units would be formulated from those themes or topics. Inspectors encouraged teachers to include the four main skills when those themes or topics were being covered with the class. In part of the literature for the higher course it is recommended that a link be made with these themes and topics and that literature be dealt with as a central and integrated part of the teaching units. This sort of approach would avoid studying literature as a reading and writing task in itself, separate from the integration of the language skills.

Teaching of grammar

Inspectors' reported that the teaching of grammar was referred to infrequently in the planning documentation that they reviewed. However, the teaching of grammar should be mentioned as a necessary unit in itself in planning, consistent with the targets of the various levels in the subject. Planning for the teaching of grammar is all the more important as grammar is an aspect of the teaching of Irish to which frequent reference is made in the course of lessons.

The reports relating to Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools drew attention to the desirability of giving guidance to students regarding accuracy in writing Irish according to *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (The Official Standard), without prejudice to their richness of language in speech. The

additional challenge facing teachers of other subjects in those schools, in following a common high standard in written Irish when teaching their own subjects, was also recognised.

Use of dictation

The reports made no reference to planning and preparation for the use of dictation with students. However, the reports often recommended that short items of dictation should be undertaken from time to time, with a view to the effective integration of language skills.

Use of translation

Inspectors' reports did not note any reference in schools' planning documentation to the use of translation as a methodology. The Junior Certificate Irish syllabus included the objective "that students will be familiar with the metalanguage pertaining to class work and to the examination, so that there will be no need to become dependent on English in the classroom or during examinations." (Department of Education and Science, [1988], p. 8). This is consistent with the approach recommended in the teaching of other modern languages and it would be beneficial for teachers of Irish and other languages to agree a school policy regarding the use of translation as an aspect of language teaching.

Features of good practice

- Planning and preparation that provides opportunities for students to use the language in learning activities
- Planning for the integration of language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—in themes and topics
- Teaching methodologies to be used discussed by teachers and elaborated in planning documents
- Planning encompassing the teaching of grammar, the use of dictation, and limitations on the use of translation in teaching (in Irish and other modern languages)

Concerns

- Planning and preparation that leads to an over-emphasis on teacher-talk rather than student use of the language
- Lack of planning to ensure integration of language skills
- Methodologies to be used not considered as part of the planning process
- Lack of discussion and planning on aspects such as teaching of grammar and how to avoid over-use of translation to English

3.2.5 Planning for teaching resources

Provision of resources

The inspectors' reports frequently recommended that planning for the provision and use of audio-visual resources be included in planning. They recommended that all resources of the subject department be recorded, placed in a central location in the school, and made available to teachers of Irish—especially where there was no particular classroom assigned to a teacher (or teachers).

Authentic materials

Among the best resources to help bring elements of the natural and living language to the students are authentic items from the Irish language broadcast and print media, for example TG4, RTÉ, Raidió na Gaeltachta, local radio with items in Irish, websites, and items in Irish from the newspapers. Although textbooks seek to cater for these needs, they are of limited benefit, because they soon became dated and of little interest to students.

Effective collaborative planning and the sharing of tasks among teachers can help to avoid possible duplication when such authentic resources are being recorded and collected. It is vitally important also that the material itself should be fresh and in keeping with the range of life experiences of the students themselves. Inspectors recommended that these

items be collected regularly, and that scope be left for that in planning work. This approach was mentioned in one of the reports:

Recognition is given to the reference in the second year plan to the use of a variety of materials independent of the textbooks, for example videos, games, quizzes, various reading materials.

Material is available on websites relating to Irish that could be put to good use here. A recommendation about this was made in almost half of the reports, advocating the use of information and communication technology in planning work for junior cycle classes. The following comment is a good illustration of the various recommendations:

That the Irish teachers would receive training in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a means of instruction and that they would then undertake planning concerning the use of ICT in the Irish class.

Examination papers

The reports reveal that schools plan carefully to ensure that students are familiar with the requirements of the certificate examination papers. Plans provided that students gained appropriate experience of the layout and nature of the questions on the papers.

However, the way in which schools intended that past

examination papers be used in lessons was unclear in the school planning documentation. If examination papers are used too early in the teaching of Irish with junior classes it is most likely that the examination—the written examination in the main—will be the aim and function that the students will associate with the learning of Irish. It is recommended that the requirements of the certificate examination papers should not be the focus of learning until absolutely necessary. It is also recommended that limited use be made of past examination papers for aural comprehension. These aural texts are not authentic and tend to be contrived conversations and announcements. Inspectors believe that it is much better to use items in the living language, recorded from the broadcast media, with students. Using these materials provides students with enjoyable and authentic experiences that support their ability to communicate through the language.

Features of good practice

- Planning for the provision and use of resources included within the planning process
- Collection and provision of authentic language materials from television, radio, the internet and other media for use in language lessons
- Good selection of books in Irish included in the school library
- Access to ICT resources for teaching and learning

Concerns

- Over-reliance on textbooks as the main teaching resource
- Lack of authentic language materials in lessons
- Over-use of past examination papers as a teaching and learning resource leading to an over-emphasis on written language rather than oral skills
- Use of extracts from past examination papers as basis for aural comprehension rather than authentic language sources such as excerpts from radio, television and the internet

3.3 Monitoring and school self-review of the plan for Irish

Monitoring and self-review are intrinsic to effective planning in schools. However, only two of the inspection reports made significant reference to good self-evaluation practice in schools.

One report contained an account of a review done by the Irish department on the strengths and weaknesses of the activities of the Irish department. Part of that review consisted of an action plan agreed by the members of the department to effect improvement in the teaching and learning of the subject—a short-term plan promoting spoken Irish among the students as an agreed aim. In another inspection report there was an account of the self-appraisal done by a particular teacher of the work completed, together with recommendations for improvement.

Features of good practice

- Regular monitoring and review and adjustment as necessary of the plan for Irish
- Clear action plans based on outcomes of reviews

Concerns

- Regular monitoring and critical self-review featuring infrequently in school planning



Chapter 4

The quality of teaching and learning

In general, the inspectors' findings about the quality of teaching and learning were positive and encouraging. However a number of concerns were expressed and proposals made with a view to extending and promoting good practice.

4.1 Classroom atmosphere

The most positive comments regarding teaching and learning that emerged from the reports were those commenting on a positive classroom atmosphere. There was widespread evidence in the reports of the regard shown by students and teachers for each other during the inspection work. Examples like these were to be found in reports from all over the country.

There was a positive learning atmosphere in all classes and the students were eager to take part in the class activities—particularly oral activities—something for which great credit is due to the teachers.

It was observed in all classes visited that there was an open welcoming atmosphere between students and teachers. The teachers and students had an easy relationship with each other. This added greatly to the co-operation that occurred in the learning and teaching process in hand.

In contrast, very few reports expressed concern or made recommendations about classroom atmosphere. One example noted:

It was difficult, however, to motivate some students and it is recommended to the teachers that they discuss among themselves the formulation of strategies to deal with these reluctant students. It is also recommended that the school management give every support, help and advice to the teachers in this regard, particularly to new teachers in the school.

4.2 Methodologies and teaching approaches

4.2.1 Lesson structure

In general, the inspectors' reports indicated that the vast majority of lessons observed—more than 80%—had clear aims. More than half of the reports commented favourably on the fact that the aim of the lessons was shared with the students at the beginning of the lesson. One report noted:

A clear aim was integral to the teaching material of all classes observed—aims that were described at the start of the classes.

Where the aim of the class is shared with students in this way, it indicates that the content of the lesson has been well-

prepared and that clear learning targets to be achieved in the course of the lesson have been identified. It is recommended that sharing the aim of the lessons with students in this way should be normal practice at the start of all lessons, and that at the end of each lesson, summarising what has been achieved during the lesson would be worthwhile. One report advised as follows:

It is recommended when the aims of the lessons are being described to students, that it would be done in such a way as to enable them to understand what they had learnt or what language functions they would be able to implement at the end of the classes. It would be worth spending a couple of minutes at the end of class summarising what had been learnt.

Positive comments are made in over a third of the reports concerning the structure of lessons and the appropriate time allocated to tasks in the lessons. Typical comments included:

The preparation completed for the classes observed was of a very good standard. The classes were very well structured and the allocation of time to the various tasks to be carried out by students was appropriate in the great majority of classes.

In almost half the reports inspectors reported favourably on the fact that teachers had ensured continuity with work already completed with students. These positive comments about lesson structure and continuity of learning are

indicators of appropriate preparation and planning, and of the effectiveness of the teachers involved in learning and teaching activities. It is recommended that this practice be extended.

4.2.2 Use of the target language

The use of the target language is essential if the communicative aims of the syllabus are to be achieved.

The basis for the communicative approach is that there be a "need" or "exigency" to communicate. It is acknowledged that there are many students who would see no need to learn Irish on account of the absence of support for the language in the environment, but it appears possible to provide a stimulus for students, in the short term at least, if a need to use the language is created by means of meaningful activities that stimulate their interest and imagination. (Ó Laoire, 2004).

Reference is made in all the reports to this central aspect of the teaching and learning of the language. Since the use of the language is the basic aim of the syllabus for the teaching of Irish, it is through the use of the language in the classroom that students are led to understand that Irish is a language and that it is studied in order to speak it (NCCA, p.27). Using the target language in teaching and learning should not be confined to students with a higher competence in Irish (such as those studying at the higher level and in Gaeltacht and

Irish-medium schools). This practice caters appropriately for the abilities and needs of the other categories of learners as well, i.e. those students for whom the appropriate aim in the language is basic communication through Irish (foundation level), as well as students who already have certain language skills (ordinary level).

The inspectors' reports noted and affirmed good practice in the use of the target language in many schools, and almost as frequently, recommended the extension of this good practice. Among the references to good practice are the following examples:

It was noticed that the target language was in use all the time with these classes and that the students appeared to be accustomed to this approach and to be at their ease with it.

Every effort was made to use Irish as a medium of instruction and as a normal language of communication in class, even in the weakest classes, and this work method is commendable.

Irish was in use as the medium of instruction in the classes and it was clear that this was the experience of the students in the majority of classes. Irish was the normal language of communication in some of the classes and the students demonstrated this through seeking clarification in Irish.

However, good practice was not always universal even in those schools where practice was praised. Some of the concerns raised in the reports about this aspect of teaching included the following:

The target language was in use as the medium of communication with the students. It was not always clear, however, that the students understood the instructions given to them. Questions in English came, from time to time, from the students which were not in keeping with the efforts of the teacher to ensure that Irish was spoken.

Irish was in use as the medium of instruction and the normal language of communication in all the classes except in the case of individual students who had just returned from abroad. It is of the utmost importance to remember that these students will best learn the language through immersion in Irish rather than with the help of translation. (Gaeltacht school)

It is recommended that the practice of using Irish in classes be extended as the students are depending on the language input that is available to them when Irish is in use in the classroom. It is also recommended that the classroom language needed by the students is taken into account when planning is under way for the teaching of the subject—particularly in the case of first-year classes.

4.2.3 Use of translation

As noted earlier, the syllabus for Junior Certificate Irish discourages dependence on English during Irish lessons and examinations. In approximately one third of the reports, the efforts made by teachers not to become dependent on translation in class were praised.

On the whole, the teachers made great efforts not to become dependent on translation from Irish to English and a wide range of clever expedients was used to ensure students' understanding of the subject-matter of the lesson and of basic instructions to the class.

A similar number of reports, however, expressed concern that translation was overused.

Certain benefits accrue from translation work—provided it is done subsequent to understanding the subject-matter rather than as an initial step in learning. The practice of translating was exemplified in the textbooks in use in certain classes where a “match” had to be made between Irish phrases and English translations of them. Such work from textbooks should be avoided. Similarly, when a question is asked in class about the meaning of certain words, it would be better to seek a meaning in simpler Irish at first in preference to accepting a translation into English.

It was felt that translation was resorted to in some classes and that the simplest instructions were being translated from Irish to English for students who were well able to understand them in Irish.

It was clear that there was a greater emphasis on memorisation and translation than on using the language for the purpose of true communication.

Inspectors recommended that students should not rely on translation to English. In addition inspectors believed that teachers should focus on the use of translation as part of their planning discussions on the best teaching methodologies to be used in the teaching of the subject.

It is recommended, however, that students should not be reliant on translation to English for the meaning of words. Other strategies could be used such as using dictionaries to help them understand the meanings of words, particularly when taking account of different learning abilities and styles.

It is recommended that teachers discuss [the use of translation] among themselves at one of the planning meetings, with a view to formulating a range of strategies designed to avoid the use of translation.

4.2.4 Differentiated teaching

In general, inspectors identified a need for greater differentiation in teaching approaches so as to cater for the learning needs of students. Mixed-ability classes in particular demand differentiated strategies from the teacher in order to cater appropriately for the varying needs of the students, but

differentiated teaching needs to be practised in all classes. The needs of able students must be taken into account just as much as the needs of weak students.

Some positive comments on the use of differentiated approaches were made in a small number of reports.

Questionnaires were distributed among the students (relating to an item taken from the TG4 television programme which they had just seen in class). There was variety in the questions which catered for the various abilities in the class—simple questions which sought only one-word answers and other questions in which a verb was needed in the answer.

A good challenge was put to the students to answer the reading comprehension material in the textbook by asking them well-chosen questions that demanded a personal opinion. Simpler, more appropriate questions were asked of other students.

In other reports, teachers were encouraged to use a range of approaches to cater adequately for student needs:

In the case of mixed-ability classes, it would be beneficial to use differentiated material to cater for the full range of students' abilities and not make provision solely for the weakest students in teaching and learning.

In the case of classes in which there are students with Irish of a high standard, for example students coming into first year from Irish-medium primary schools, it is recommended that

more challenging work be given to them and that use be made of differentiated learning to cater for their needs. This will ensure that they will not totally lose interest in the subject because of being significantly ahead of other students as regards Irish.

Features of good practice

- A positive classroom atmosphere
- Commitment of teachers
- Well structured lessons, in which the aims of learning activities were shared with students
- Use of target language in lessons
- Avoiding the over-use of translation (noted in one-third of reports)
- Team-teaching used to test, review and promote methodologies

Concerns

- Need to improve use of target language in lessons
- Use of target language confined to activities for higher level students
- Over-use of translation in learning activities
- Over-emphasis placed on learning through memorisation and translation rather than through practising communication

4.3 Lesson content

4.3.1 Fostering conversation

The syllabus for Junior Cycle Irish notes that “the main role of the teacher is to provide suitable language input [to students] through textbooks, audio-visual aids and natural materials and to have students functioning through the medium of Irish as soon as possible.” (Department of Education and Science, [1988], p.13). More than one third of the inspection reports provided positive accounts of the way in which conversation was fostered in the lessons. In Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools, this forms an integral part of class work all the time; nonetheless the positive accounts in the reports related to schools in which English is the medium just as much as to the Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools. The inspectors strongly recommended the extension of the good practices that had been affirmed in the reports.

Examples of positive accounts from the reports included the following:

At the start of one of the classes, time was allocated to general conversation. This approach deserves great praise for the reason that it helps students to settle down and begin thinking about Irish and through Irish as well as revising material already done.

An opportunity was given to the students to practise conversation in pairs. It was clear that the students had a lot of experience of this good practice. In another class the students had to compose and answer questions about the poet. At the end of the class, role play was organised at the top of the class based on the work in pairs. This practice deserves high praise and particularly the opportunity that was afforded the students not alone to answer questions but also to compose and ask each other questions. (Irish-medium school)

In other reports, however, concerns were expressed about the limited opportunities provided for conversation in Irish:

In certain cases this aspect [conversation] was well developed. In other cases the amount of conversation engaged in by the students was limited—in terms of the amount of time devoted to it and the quality of the answers expected from the students.

Time was allocated at the start of class in a couple of cases to general conversation in Irish. It is recommended that this practice is extended and that spoken Irish becomes a normal part of each class because of the importance of affording students an opportunity of making normal conversation in Irish as well as doing the class work.

Inspectors recommended a range of approaches that could be used to foster conversation in the lessons:

It is recommended that work in pairs, role play and drama are used regularly in the classes to ensure that plenty of opportunities for communication are created for students. It is

important to ensure that opportunities are given to students of making functional use of what they have learned in the Irish classes.

It is recommended that time is spent at the start of class on general conversation relating to ordinary everyday events or to a matter of interest to students as was done in one case. This would give them an opportunity to think about Irish and in Irish as well as to practise speaking Irish, and this would also help the class to settle down.

Features of good practice

- Ensuring regular opportunities for conversation with the teacher and among the students
- Promoting work in pairs, group work and role-play
- Using questioning to encourage students to express opinions
- Promoting ordinary conversation at the start of class
- Accepting simple Irish from students consistent with their abilities
- Including conversational work as an item in homework

Concerns

- Limited time spent on conversational work
- Over-emphasis on reading from textbooks and on written work
- Students speaking only to answer teacher's questions
- Few opportunities for students to express their opinions
- Oral discussion on reading comprehension limited to questions in textbooks

4.3.2 Ensuring lesson content is linked to the lives of the students

The guidelines that accompany the Irish syllabus for Junior Certificate advise that “every effort must be made to ensure that situations for communication between students are set in interesting and realistic contexts.” (NCCA, p.1). It is clear that students will be more interested in class activities which are linked to their own life experience and which will stimulate them to participate or to express an opinion. The teacher has to choose subjects or to address topics in such a way as to stimulate student interest. More than half of the reports state that this was this being accomplished effectively.

The way in which certain elements of one lesson were connected to the contemporary lives of the students themselves was highly praised.

This subject-matter was linked very effectively to their own experience—a factor which stimulated them to speak Irish and to express their own opinions.

Some reports noted, however, that greater efforts could be made to link lesson content to contemporary events and topics:

There was not, for example, much interest shown among students (all girls) in the subject-matter for reading comprehension (which related to the activities of a young man from Ireland as a player with a football club in Australia). Although an international football game was to be played within a couple of days in Croke Park, between Ireland and

Australia, no reference was made to that game during the course of the class. Neither was the opportunity taken to establish a conversation with the students apart from answering the questions about the reading comprehension extract in the textbook.

It is recommended that links are made with the contemporary lives of the students in all the classes. It is extremely important to ask the students questions about their own lives and to connect the subject-matter of the lessons to topics in which they are interested. This helps to extend and develop their experience of Irish as a living language.

4.3.3 Integration of language skills

In almost half the reports there were positive comments on the way in which the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing were being presented in an integrated way in lessons. This was best achieved where a single theme or subject matter was explored through all of the skills in a single lesson:

There was a good structure to the classes and an appropriate amount of time was spent on particular activities. Work moved from reading to writing, and to aural comprehension in some cases, and speaking Irish was practised. In that way an effort was made to practise the various language skills during the course of one class, which is a commendable practice.

This sort of practice is consistent with the teacher guidelines

that accompany the Irish syllabus for Junior Certificate:

In any teaching unit it would be advisable to develop the various language skills together. The subject-matter could, for example, be presented by showing a videotape or playing a recording and basing suitable exercises on that. A class conversation or a conversation in pairs could be based on the same subject-matter. If the teacher wishes to do some reading based on the same subject-matter, the students will already have a large part of the basic vocabulary before they start the reading at all. It is better to base writing on the same subject-matter so that the students will not be writing about one topic and reading about another one entirely. All the skills are dependent on one another and it is better to develop them together. (NCCA, p.4)

Inspectors advocated the use of this integrated approach in preference to one where language skills were practised independently of each other—in such a way that, for example, conversation would be practised on Monday, reading on Tuesday, writing on Wednesday, listening on Thursday, or any other unsatisfactory arrangement that would segregate the practice of language skills from each other. Typical recommendations from some reports included:

That the integration of the various language skills be made an aim, as far as possible, in the instruction undertaken with a class.

It is recommended that the integration of skills within one lesson, by means of interesting themes, is continued.

4.3.4 Grammar

Although the syllabus places an emphasis on the development of students' fluency, it also notes that "grammatical points should not be neglected, however, and they should perhaps be formally taught from time to time in accordance with their importance to the activities under way in the class." (Department of Education and Science, [1988], p.13). There are positive references to the teaching of grammar in almost 40% of the reports.

In the majority of cases grammatical work was introduced as part of the work under way in the class. In other cases it was undertaken in a more formal way.

When a student succeeded in giving the answer "is fear dóiteáin é (he is a fireman)" to the teacher's question, significant praise was given to the excellence of the answer and that grammatical structure was practised with the class and then with individual students.

A number of the reports noted that grammatical errors in students' Irish were ignored and recommended that teachers should note the errors and return to them at the end of lessons:

Only one limited aspect of grammar was addressed during an entire class period—revision of verbs in the past tense.

Major errors were ignored so as not to interrupt the presentation, which was understandable at the time. Nevertheless, sentences incorporating basic errors were left without any corrections being made.

[Referring to the use of the autonomous verb in translation, without providing functional context for it] It would be much better to provide exemplars of authentic texts in which the autonomous verb was used and then to draw attention to it as a grammatical point. A short news item could be recorded in which good examples could be freely heard, for example "Dúnadh an mótarbhealach M1 de bharr timpiste (The M1 motorway was closed due to an accident)," or "Maraíodh fear i dtimpiste (A man was killed in an accident)."

It would be worth taking a discreet note during the class of the main grammatical points—both good and bad—and returning to them at the end of the class in order to draw attention to them.

It is recommended that teachers should refer regularly to grammar in the form of incidental items, and introduce a formal course of grammar to students, consistent with appropriate learning targets based on the various levels in the subject. With students who already have a good knowledge of Irish, references could be made regularly to the requirements of Irish grammar so as to encourage them to speak and write the language correctly.

4.3.5 Pronunciation

Inspectors believed that improvements were necessary in the development of students' pronunciation. Pronunciation is critical for the correct sounding of words, for aural comprehension, for communication in general, and for accurate writing of the language.

Where good practice was observed, inspectors noted that teachers encouraged more accurate pronunciation in a positive way:

In certain instances the faulty pronunciation of students was effectively corrected in a way that did not dishearten the students.

The pronunciation of students was good on the whole, and effective use was made of repetition in certain cases to ensure that students were able to pronounce new words and sentences correctly.

In some reports, inspectors made specific recommendations pointing to the need to improve this aspect of the subject:

This work [development of accuracy in pronunciation] is important and it is recommended that it be specially emphasised in the teaching of classes in the earlier years at junior cycle particularly in order that students would have a better understanding of the relationship between the written word and the sound of the word.

Features of good practice

- Lesson content clearly linked to lives and interests of students
- Effective integration of language skills – aural comprehension, speech, reading and writing practised in course of each lesson
- Teaching of grammar naturally integrated into lessons
- Grammatical errors noted and addressed later in lesson or in further lesson
- Accurate pronunciation encouraged skilfully in a positive way
- Vocabulary extended through study of integrated themes

Concerns

- Lesson content unlinked to experiences and interests of students
- Teaching of the language skills independently of each other—for example in different lessons or on different days
- Intensive work on one aspect of grammar for an entire lesson
- Translation to English used to confirm students' understanding of grammar
- Pronunciation and grammar errors ignored
- Vocabulary lists memorised without adequate connection to correct use

4.3.6 Extension of vocabulary

In their reports, inspectors identified a need to improve the vocabulary acquisition of students. In some cases they noted that

vocabulary development was under way in each class and [that] the students had a folder containing a word-list and grammatical points—an initial step in independent learning.

However, they recommended that efforts be made to increase the vocabulary of the students by selecting themes and studying them in an integrated way, rather than giving lists of words to be memorised, without any connection with their current use in class.

4.4 The learning environment and teaching resources

4.4.1 A stimulating learning environment

Inspectors noted that where students and teachers had to move from one room to another in the course of the day, the creation of a learning environment to support the teaching of Irish was difficult. Where a classroom was allocated to the teacher it was much easier to provide a stimulating learning environment in the subject. The need to renew displays regularly was also noted.

The classrooms which were in use for Irish were decorated to a high standard with notices and posters in Irish that were attractive and stimulating—among them current notices for plays in Irish as part of a theatre festival.

It is recommended that the classroom walls should be used to display material that would be supportive and stimulating for the teaching and learning of the subject and that the number of samples of work done by the students themselves which were on display should be increased.

In eight of the reports, the inspectors praised the opportunities provided for students to create classroom displays of their own work in the subject. Teachers were praised for the way in which this fostered students' self-esteem. This practice is more readily implemented where a classroom or classrooms are dedicated to Irish, but it is also possible to use other walls or areas for such displays.

4.4.2 Authentic texts

It is recommended in both the syllabus and teacher guidelines for Irish that authentic texts be used in the teaching of Irish and other modern languages with a view to presenting the language as a communicative living language.

For example, suitable extracts chosen from newspapers or magazines from time to time should be studied, in addition to pieces chosen from suitable radio or television programmes relating to everyday current affairs. (Department of Education and Science, [1988], p.5)

It is recommended that as many authentic texts as possible be used, i.e. texts which are interesting in themselves and not texts composed to illustrate certain points of grammar. (NCCA, p.20).

Despite this advice, the use of authentic texts is mentioned only occasionally in the reports of the inspectors. For example, inspectors praised instances where short items from the broadcast media were used in preference to items of aural comprehension where the speech had been artificially constructed:

A well-chosen extract taken from the website www.beo.ie was in use for reading comprehension. The extract related to a well-known broadcaster (who had connections in the school district).

Well-chosen extracts from programmes recorded from TG4 were used with the first year classes. These related to work already under way with the classes. The attention of the students was directed to a particular vocabulary. Each extract from the programme was played without any interruption. Questionnaires relating to the two extracts were later distributed among the students.

Recommendations encouraging the extension of this good practice were included in a number of reports:

It would be worth recording items of the living language from the Irish language broadcast media and to use them in class.

This would provide variety for the students and they would hear the language spoken by other people apart from just the teacher. An item of this sort could also be availed of as dictation and used to practise listening and writing skills together. It would also be worthwhile giving the students an insight into the amount of Irish available on the internet as a demonstration of Irish in the contemporary world rather than as a language limited only to the textbook and to examination papers.

It is recommended, moreover, that authentic texts from the media be used to develop students' awareness of the various media in which Irish is available.

4.4.3 Textbooks and past examination papers

A variety of teaching materials should be used in the interest of novelty and in order to maximise the attention of the students. Students will best come to understand the language as a living language in authentic texts. In contrast, the function of examination papers is to assess how effectively language skills have been learned. If examination papers are an integral part of the work of learning and teaching, they interfere with the acquisition of a communicative and living language which is a core aim of the course.

Inspectors recommended strongly in the reports that the use

of past examination papers be avoided until absolutely necessary, and that authentic texts be substituted in their place.

It is strongly recommended that past examination papers be avoided as class texts until there is a real need to use them—as practice for the examination itself for example. It would be far better to use authentic texts—*Foinse*, for example—to enrich the vocabulary of the students.

4.4.4 Information and communication technology (ICT)

Reference has already been made to the lack of use of information and communication technology in the teaching of Irish. The inspection reports referred only occasionally to the use of ICT in the teaching of Irish.

Nevertheless, some instances of good practice in the use of ICT were included in the inspectors' accounts and the reports recommended that an effort be made to derive optimum benefit from new technology in order to promote Irish as a contemporary and living language.

Effective use was made of a laptop computer to encourage students to speak to the teacher and among themselves. By means of projection equipment, attractive multi-coloured images were beamed onto the wall and the students' interest in the lesson was held from the beginning. Among them were

pictures of sports' heroes like Paul O'Connell, Wayne Rooney, Páidí Ó Sé, and so on.

One first year class was held in the computer room where excellent facilities were available. No little effort went into the preparation of the material for use with the data projector—material relating to the days of the week, months of the year, counting numbers and reading the clock. This material was attractive in terms of colour, print, and diagrams. This innovation in the use of information and communication technology in support of the teaching of Irish is commendable.

4.4.5 Dictionaries

Inspectors noted the value of dictionaries as a reference source in order to enrich vocabulary, confirm correct spelling, and promote independent learning. In one report, for example, the following was stated:

It would be worth having authoritative dictionaries available in the class and giving guidance to students concerning the correct use of those dictionaries. This would give them more examples of the accurate writing of Irish.

Students should be introduced to the use of electronic dictionaries—such as www.acmhainn.ie and www.focal.ie and the CD *WinGléacht* that can be used as an Irish-English dictionary and as an English-Irish dictionary (Ó Dónaill)—as well as conventional paper-based dictionaries.

Features of good practice

- Base classrooms for teachers of Irish to facilitate the creation of a stimulating learning environment
- Extensive use of authentic texts and oral materials
- Good use of ICT
- Use of conventional and electronic dictionaries to extend vocabulary and promote independent learning

Concerns

- Over-use of past examination papers and textbooks
- Lack of use of ICT in learning and teaching

4.5 Quality of learning

4.5.1 Student engagement in learning activities

Almost half of the inspectors' reports comment favourably on the level of student engagement in lessons. Student engagement was most effective where the teacher used a wide range of teaching and learning strategies to ensure that students were actively involved in learning activities, and where students' confidence in their own learning was fostered.

The students were confident and entirely willing to take an active part in the work of the classes. A range of enjoyable activities was planned for implementation in each class and it was felt that both students and teachers enjoyed the classes. Particular note was taken of the debating work that occurred in one case, where students took an active part in a way that demonstrated their interest in the class.

Excellent work was being done in those groups in terms of role-play. Very clear guidance was given to the group at the outset concerning the task to be done and the teacher helped these groups all the time through sitting in with the various groups for a short period supplying vocabulary, stimulating debate and listening.

In contrast, student engagement was less successful where an over-emphasis was placed on teacher-talk:

On the whole, the amount of talk done in the classes was unbalanced in favour of the teacher. It would be worth reflecting on that imbalance and making every effort to involve students actively [in the work of the class] and giving homework in support of that.

4.5.2 Oral ability of students

In approximately one third of the reports, inspectors state that students demonstrated limited oral language ability—a finding which illustrates the challenge posed by this fundamental aim in the teaching of the language. In these

reports, inspectors recommended that additional time be spent on the fostering of oral Irish and that every effort be made to provide students with opportunities to speak the language.

All the efforts [at conversational work] were praiseworthy but it was noted that a very limited amount of time was spent on this aspect of learning in comparison with the amount of time spent reading from the textbook or on other written work.

It was felt that students had a good knowledge of various words and sentences but that they were unable to use them in different communication contexts because they had no experience of such work.

It is recommended that oral Irish be included in the homework given to the students and that they be urged to take an active part in conversational work in class.

Opportunities for communication must be created regularly in all classes. This would add greatly to students' self-confidence and to their interest in the learning of the language.

Features of good practice

- Students actively involved in learning activities
- Student confidence in their own learning encouraged

Concerns

- Student engagement lessened by over-emphasis on teacher-talk
- Students demonstrated limited oral language ability in approximately one-third of reports



Chapter 5

The quality of assessment

In general, the inspectors' reports contained positive comments on the quality of assessment practices in schools, but highlighted a number of specific areas for improvement.

5.1. Assessment of incoming first-year students

Inspectors reported that schools used various arrangements to assess the abilities of incoming first-year students. The most common arrangements referred to in the reports were:

- written assessment examinations used to identify the learning needs of students so as to distribute students of different abilities evenly among classes—i.e. to form mixed-ability classes
- written assessment examinations used to identify the ability of students in Irish so as to assign them to classes consistent with their ability—i.e. to facilitate streaming of classes
- written assessment examinations used to identify the ability of students in Irish so as to assign them to bands among classes consistent with their ability—i.e. banding of classes, a variation of streaming
- no examination used in Irish; instead students were distributed evenly among classes—i.e. in randomly formed mixed-ability classes.

Schools that formed mixed-ability classes on entry varied in the length of time students remained in these classes. In the case of some schools it was reported that mixed-ability classes were maintained up to December in first year or to the end of first year, and that thereafter classes were formed according to the different levels in the Junior Certificate examination. In other cases, mixed-ability classes were continued until the end of second year. In general, in Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools, students were in mixed-ability classes for the entire period of the junior cycle.

The decision regarding the arrangements to be used to assess students' abilities on entry and to assign them to class groupings is a matter for each school to determine in the light of local circumstances. However, the use of mixed-ability classes, at least in first year, is recommended by inspectors and the Department of Education and Science as it helps to minimise the disadvantages associated with streaming. For example, one of the inspection reports commented as follows:

Students do not sit an examination on their arrival in the school in first year, and students are distributed among the first year classes on a mixed-ability basis. In regard to Irish, the classes are formally split in third year in accordance with the subject level. Reasonable opportunities are given to students in first year and in second year to achieve at the higher level.

It is also interesting to note that research on the experiences of first-year students in general has shown that the prevalence of streaming in first year is declining, and that the great majority (70%) of schools use mixed-ability classes in first year. (Smyth et al, 2004).

Inspectors were concerned to note that none of the schools in which assessments of incoming first year students were conducted attempted to assess the oral ability of the students concerned. Both the revised *Primary School Curriculum* in Irish for fifth and sixth classes, and the aims of the junior cycle syllabus in Irish, place a strong emphasis on oral competence. In the light of the aims of these curricula, it is clear that any assessment of incoming first-year pupils should seek to examine students' oral skills.

5.2 Range and frequency of assessment in junior cycle

It is clear from very many references in the reports that students gain experience of a wide range of assessment modes from the beginning of first year. Among the kinds of assessment mentioned in the reports were oral questioning in class; continuous assessment or termly, monthly or weekly assessment of reading comprehension, aural comprehension,

composition, and oral work, (mentioned in a limited number of cases); class tests at the end of each work unit in the textbook; assessment of homework; practice on past examination papers; formal in-house examinations; and test examinations for classes in their certificate examination year. The following extract is typical of much of the commentary on assessment practice:

The students' work is assessed through questioning in class, setting and correcting homework, examinations at the end of a work unit and in-house examinations. In certain cases continuous assessment is carried out on the students' work and this approach is commended.

5.3 Oral Irish in school-based and certificate examinations

Inspectors expressed most concern about the lack of assessment of students' oral language skills in the junior cycle years, and the consequent divergence that was apparent between the stated aims of the syllabus and the experiences of students.

65% of the reports indicated that assessment of oral Irish did not form part of the assessment work completed with classes

at junior cycle. Only 28% of the reports indicated that efforts were being made to carry out an assessment of oral Irish—and that it was not a universal practice in those schools. The remaining 7% of the reports did not comment on this aspect of assessment. Although assessment of spoken Irish does not ensure that the ability of students in oral Irish will improve, the inspectors strongly believed that the recognition given to the efforts of students to speak Irish fostered their desire to communicate in the language.

In the minority of schools in which assessment of oral skills was conducted, inspectors praised the efforts made to ensure that all language skills were assessed:

It was stated that regular assessment is conducted of all the language skills including spoken language, and this deserves great praise. It is important that students get an insight into their own progress regarding the different skills and their learning needs. It was noted that, in the school reports sent home, there is a special place for the spoken language and the students' diligence in regard to it. Again, this practice is commendable.

In certain exceptional cases efforts to give a central place to the speaking of the language as part of the school's assessment system were noted:

In certain cases between ten and twenty of the marks (in-house examinations) were allocated for the fluency of the

students in the language. It would be worth adopting this as a common approach so as to ensure that the quality of the appraisal would be uniform and that it would be easier to compare students' achievements.

However, this sort of practice occurred only in a minority of schools. The reason most often mentioned to inspectors for the lack of assessment of oral Irish with junior cycle classes was that oral Irish was not a requirement of the Junior Certificate examination. The optional oral examination has been available as an element of the Junior Certificate Irish examination since the introduction of the examination. However, in 2005 only three out of the seventy-five schools referred to in this report submitted applicants for that optional oral examination. In addition, these applicants were only a small minority of the students taking the Irish examination in two of those three schools. Nationally, fewer than 1% of candidates taking the Junior Certificate Irish examination undertook the optional Irish test.

There was evidence in some of the reports that some teachers and principals were in favour of formal assessment of oral Irish in the Junior Certificate examination:

It was understood from the teachers that they would welcome the optional oral Irish examination being a central part of the Junior Certificate examination on condition that external assessors were involved.

The principal stated, specifically, that she is of the opinion that it would be beneficial for the subject if more emphasis were placed on communication skills and if more credit were given for those skills in the certificate examinations. She stated this on foot of the trends that she has noticed that students are more successful in acquiring modern European languages *ab initio* as spoken languages over the six years of their second level schooling. She referred to the contrast between this progress and the limited way in which the same diligent students succeed in acquiring Irish as a spoken language even though they have been learning Irish since they started primary school. She recommended that more emphasis be placed at junior and senior cycle on communication and aural comprehension.

It was understood from the principal that she was greatly in favour of the optional oral examination being an integral part of the Junior Certificate [Irish] examination.

Irrespective of the requirements of certificate examinations, the inspectors recommended in the reports that oral Irish be promoted as an effective tool in itself in the acquisition of the language. Comments such as the following were found frequently in the reports:

It is recommended that the spoken language be assessed also. It is only right that it be made clear to the students that oral language skills are of equal value to other language skills. It is good when students gain an insight into their progress regarding all the language skills and their learning needs as a result. The best way of accomplishing this is to observe and assess on an ongoing basis in the classroom and throughout the school.

In summary, the inspectors reports demonstrate that assessment practices in the schools are not consistent with the aims of the syllabus and that they require radical change if the promotion of spoken Irish in teaching and learning is to be achieved.

However, one reservation must be noted. The inspectors believed that it would be futile to have assessment of oral Irish as a central aspect of the assessment system in the absence of the effective practice of communication in the language with students on an ongoing basis. The danger in this would be that preparation for oral assessment on a limited range of material only would take place close to the time of the test—a practice which would render the whole exercise futile.

5.4 Monitoring of written work and homework

Comments in the inspectors' reports about the monitoring of students' written work and especially about the use of homework were largely positive. Reports frequently noted that schools had implemented a homework policy. They also commented favourably that appropriate amounts of homework were being given to students, and that homework was closely related to the requirements of the syllabus and

the work that was completed in class. Typical comments included:

The school has a homework policy that directs teachers to give and correct homework and to give feedback to students on it.

Homework was corrected in a helpful way. It was noted that some copybooks contained personal notes as a guide from the teacher making the corrections. It was pleasing to see that the name of the student was often mentioned when the note was written. This is commendable and it has a major impact on students.

Reports regularly referred to the effective use of students' journals to record homework, as a means of communicating with parents in regard to the monitoring of homework, and in order to give information on students' progress in the subject.

While positive comments were found in many reports, a significant number of reports contained recommendations that such good practice needs to be extended to all teachers. Attention was also drawn to how necessary it is that students should learn from the corrections:

Copybook work was being corrected and guidance was being provided to students by means of the corrections in particular cases. It is recommended that the practice of giving guidance to students in the corrections made to their work is extended, so that students would know what was done well or correctly by them and how they can improve their work and make

better progress. This would help to give them a better understanding of themselves as learners and of their individual learning needs.

In a limited number of cases, however, the inspectors drew attention to a significant variation in the approach adopted within the same school, as the following extract illustrates:

There was a significant variation between the standard and the range of work in the various copybooks. It is strongly recommended to teachers that they discuss among themselves the suitability and value of the homework given to the various classes. It is also recommended that they discuss a common system of correction so as to ensure that a mark or grade is given to work and reference made to the progress of the student.

5.5 Common in-house test examinations

The use of agreed common in-house test examinations at the same levels in the subject was mentioned in the reports as good practice.

In certain cases common examinations are arranged for the classes undertaking work at the same levels. The teachers exchange scripts when corrections are being done. The teachers' practice regarding the lay-out and correction of the examination papers deserves great praise.

The inspectors commented that the use of common examinations in this way enabled a valid comparison to be drawn between students' achievements in various classes and that it facilitated the movement of students from one class to another, if necessary. The inspectors noted that agreeing the examinations also encouraged collaborative planning among the teachers.

Common examinations are arranged for the classes taking Irish at the same levels in third year. This approach deserves great praise and the same should be done in the case of the classes in other year groups, including first year. This would ensure that students in the various classes would cover the same material, which would be very important when students were being distributed among classes at the start of second year or in cases where they might have to move to another class in second or third year.

5.6 Recording assessment information

Almost all the inspection reports referred to excellent record keeping of assessment information, both by individual teachers and centrally as part of school records. The following is a typical comment:

The teachers keep an account of the results of the ongoing tests and a copy is provided to the subject co-ordinator as well,

who keeps a complete file on the progress of the students in the subject.

Recommendations to improve record keeping were exceptional. However, recommendations were made in certain cases concerning the benefit that could be gained from better use of the records of individual students' achievements. It was suggested that assessment outcomes could be used to assess the standard of students generally in the subject, to make comparisons with the national averages in the subject, and to inform reviews of teaching plans and learning targets:

It would be worth using a record of students' achievements in various examinations to review the teaching targets that best suit particular students. In that way the examination results would have a function not alone as a record of achievement in the subject but also as a guide to planning for teaching.

5.7 Reporting to parents

The arrangements in place for reporting to parents about the progress of the students in the subject were rated consistently as excellent and were praised highly in the reports.

Features of good practice

- Comprehensive assessment of incoming first-year students, including assessment of oral language abilities
- Allocation of students to mixed-ability classes in first year on the basis of good assessment information
- Use of wide range of assessment approaches throughout junior cycle years
- Assessment of oral language as an intrinsic element of assessment throughout all three years of junior cycle
- Students encouraged to take the optional oral element in the Junior Certificate examination
- Careful monitoring of written work and homework
- Common in-house examinations developed collaboratively by teaching staff
- Careful recording of assessment information

Concerns

- Streaming of students, especially in first year
- Assessment of students based mainly or wholly on reading and written tasks despite emphasis on oral language in primary and junior cycle curricula (65% of reports)
- Fewer than 1% of candidates taking the optional oral element of Junior Certificate examination



Chapter 6

Summary of main findings and recommendations

6.1 The quality of subject provision and whole-school support

In the great majority of instances, the inspectors' assessment of the provision being made for Irish, and of the whole-school support being provided for the teaching and learning of Irish, was positive.

Timtabling

Findings

About a third of the schools gave five periods per week to Irish in each year at junior cycle. About a third gave four periods in one year and five in the other two years; and about a third gave four periods in each year at junior cycle.

Recommendations

Provision of five periods per week in each of the three years of junior cycle is best practice.

Student access to appropriate subject level

Main findings

Effective arrangements were in place generally concerning access for students to an appropriate subject level.

The arrangements most frequently in use concerning the subject level in the classes were:

- mixed-ability classes in first year
- classes segregated according to the different levels in the Junior Certificate examination from the start of the second year, based on the first year examinations
- mixed-ability classes in all the three years at junior cycle (mainly in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools).

Recommendations

Schools should use mixed-ability classes in some or all of the junior cycle years, especially in first year.

Schools should ensure students can access Irish at the level (foundation, lower, higher) most appropriate to their needs.

Concurrent timetabling of lessons should be used to allow students to access the level most suited to their needs.

Exemptions from Irish

Main findings

Practices in schools varied regarding the arrangements made for students who were exempt from studying Irish during the periods when Irish was on the class timetable.

Principals reported that the number of exemptions from Irish granted was increasing over time on account of an increased demand.

Around 7½% of students in schools visited where English was the medium had an exemption from Irish.

Recommendations

Schools should ensure that exemptions from Irish are granted in line with the relevant Department circular.

An opportunity should be given to those students who have an exemption from Irish to take part in Irish classes, particularly students from abroad who have another language (or languages).

The arrangements in place for students who have an exemption from Irish at the time when Irish is on the school timetable should be reviewed, consistent with the resources of the school, in order to derive the optimum benefit from that time.

Allocation of teachers

Main findings

Practices varied in how teachers were allocated to classes studying at different levels and at junior and senior cycle.

Recommendations

Best practice occurs where an agreed school policy provides an equal opportunity to teachers to gain experience of teaching Irish at all levels in the subject.

Classrooms and resources to support teaching and learning

Main findings

Allocating base classrooms to teachers of Irish ensured easy access to teaching resources and facilitated the provision of a stimulating environment for the teaching and learning of the subject.

The inspectors' reports also noted the constraints on some schools that limited the provision of base classrooms.

School management was willing to provide funding for teaching resources (such as video and sound materials, authentic texts, charts and additional books). However, in

general requests for teaching resources are not recorded and submitted to management by teachers of Irish on a regular and agreed basis.

Some Gaeltacht schools had access to external tutors under certain community schemes, who came to the school with the aim of enriching the students' oral Irish.

Recommendations

The allocation of classrooms (and language laboratories) for the teaching of Irish should be reviewed, so as to ensure easy access to a stock of proper resources for the teaching of the language. Schools should give consideration to allocating base classrooms to teachers of Irish where facilities permit.

The list of resources available for the teaching of the subject should be recorded and all the members of the Irish department in a school should be made aware of its contents.

At the end of each year an application should be submitted to school management for the renewal or purchase of new resources.

Information and communication technology (ICT)

Main findings

It emerged clearly from the reports that very little use was made of information and communication technology in the teaching of Irish or in the planning made for it.

Even in those limited cases where ICT was used by teachers, the students did not have hands-on experience of the technology (for example opportunities to locate material in Irish).

Recommendations

Access to ICT resources for Irish classes should be ensured so that ICT is included as part of the teaching plan for Irish.

Teachers should have opportunities to have training in the use of ICT in the teaching of Irish.

Professional development of teachers

Main findings

The inspectors' reports referred to the disappointment of principals and teachers at the lack of in-service courses available for many years in regard to methods of teaching Irish as a first or second language.

The efforts of individual teachers to access in-service courses were praised in the inspectors' reports, even though these represented only a small minority of teachers.

Recommendations

There is a clear need for better continuing professional development programmes for teachers of Irish. Since the evaluation work on which this report was based took place in schools, the Minister for Education and Science has appointed special staff under the aegis of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) to support the continuing professional development of teachers of Irish. A national coordinator and a panel of regional development officers have been appointed. An extensive programme of support is planned and it is hoped that this will help to support teachers of the subject in implementing improved teaching and learning approaches.

Whole-school policy in respect of Irish

Main findings

Gaeltacht schools and other Irish-medium schools were to the fore in regard to drafting an Irish language policy for their schools. These policies ensured a priority for Irish in school activities and helped to support Irish as the main language of the community in line with section 9(f) and section 9(h) of the *Education Act 1998*.

Recommendations

Schools can play an important role in fostering a positive and supportive attitude to Irish. Schools should ensure that they encourage and support an awareness of the importance of the language as well as its acquisition and general use.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities

Main findings

About a third of the reports mentioned the excellent co-curricular and extracurricular activities arranged by schools.

Among the activities to which most attention was drawn were visits to the school by writers in Irish and locally or nationally known personalities who were fluent in Irish.

6.2 The quality of planning and preparation

In a majority of the reports, inspectors commented that solid progress was being made in the implementation of planning for the subject.

The planning process in schools

Main findings

Inspectors reported that progress was being made in the development of collaborative planning for Irish in schools, but considerable variation in practice was noted.

The school development planning process was having a beneficial effect on schools.

The most common practices described in the inspectors' reports were a mixture of formal and informal planning for the subject.

In a significant number of reports (around 29% of the total), planning was reported as being restricted to individual planning by teachers or limited collaborative planning.

Significant variations were noted in the amount of time allocated by school management for planning in Irish.

Recommendations

Collaborative planning for Irish should be an integral part of each school's curriculum planning, and each school should have a comprehensive plan for the teaching and learning of Irish.

Schools should review their collaborative planning for Irish to ensure that all teachers participate in the process.

It is recommended that school managements make appropriate arrangements concerning the provision of time for planning.

The content of the school plan for Irish

Main findings

Much of the planning work reviewed focused on specifying the subject-matter of the teaching rather than outlining the way in which the teaching would be accomplished—the emphasis was on what was to be taught rather than on how that work would be done.

In general, collaborative planning and work schemes did not contain specific teaching, learning or assessment targets.

The teaching of grammar was adverted to only occasionally in the planning work reviewed by inspectors.

In general, inspectors reported that the planning for the assessment of students' ability in Irish, on arrival from primary school and during the three years of junior cycle, described only planning for the assessment of written Irish.

Recommendations

It is recommended that schools should develop and agree a comprehensive policy for Irish as part of the school development planning process.

Planning should outline how Irish should be used in a natural way in ordinary class activities, and should identify opportunities for communication in Irish outside the classroom in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Consideration should be given to planning a leadership role for those students who attended a summer college, particularly those who were leaders or assistants.

Collaborative planning for the subject should be informed by the two publications: *Siollabas don Teastas Sóisearach*:

Gaeilge (Department of Education and Science, [1988]) and *Gaeilge don Teastas Sóisearach: Treoirínte do Mhúinteoirí* (NCCA).

The subject plan should include common programmes detailing agreed targets for teaching, learning and assessment, year by year, for the various levels in the subject.

Planning and preparation should emphasise a core aim of the syllabus: the development and use of language through active class work. For example, planning should provide for group work, pair work, role-play and responding to authentic items from the broadcast media.

Planning and preparation should acknowledge the change of emphasis in the role of the teacher envisaged in the syllabus: the syllabus envisages the teacher as a manager of various learning activities rather than a dispenser of information.

Planning should provide for differentiated learning to meet the needs of each student including those with very little Irish as well as those who are fluent. Teacher preparation that is focused at an average level between these two groups is not adequate.

The subject plan should outline the teaching methodologies

to be used. In that context, teachers should agree the purpose of translation and limitations on its use, consistent with the guidance given in the syllabus. It is also recommended that the use of translation in teaching should be discussed with teachers of other modern languages as well, with a view to agreeing a school policy regarding the use of translation as part of language teaching.

The teaching of grammar—formally and informally—should be included as an essential component of planning for all levels. Students of Gaeltacht schools, of other Irish-medium schools and students who have acquired, or are acquiring, a good knowledge of Irish, should be made aware of the need to write accurately in accordance with *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, while at the same time, noting the richness of the oral language.

From time to time it would be worthwhile to include short items of dictation within the planning of learning activities in order to support the effective integration of language skills.

Planning for the subject should consider the teaching resources to be used and how these can be accessed readily by teachers. Resources should include audio-visual material from the Irish language broadcast media and a stock of books in Irish as additional reading material.

The plan for Irish should provide for appropriate use of textbooks and examination papers to meet the aims of the syllabus.

Almost half of the inspectors' reports recommended that the use of information and communication technology should be included as part of planning for junior cycle classes, in order to give students an opportunity to gain an insight into, and hands-on experience of, the language in use in modern technology.

6.3 The quality of teaching and learning

The inspectors' reports contained positive and encouraging comments on the quality of learning and teaching, but this has to be read alongside some concerns that they expressed and proposals that they made to extend and promote good practice.

Classroom atmosphere

Main findings

The inspectors' reports contain very positive descriptions of good classroom atmosphere, of teachers' diligence and

widespread evidence of the regard shown by students and teachers for each other during the inspection work in schools throughout the country.

Lesson structure

Main findings

The aims of the lessons were clear in more than 80% of the classes observed, and more than half the reports noted that students were informed of the aim of the lesson at the outset.

Use of the target language and avoiding over-reliance on translation

Main findings

Many reports noted good practice in the use of the target language. However, just as frequently, the reports recommended that this good practice should be extended. The speaking of Irish formed an integral part of the work of the Irish class and of the life of the Gaeltacht and other Irish-medium schools observed.

The efforts of teachers to avoid over-reliance on translation in classes was praised in about one-third of reports. In about the

same number of reports, however, concern was expressed about the over-use of translation.

Recommendations

The use of the target language in teaching and learning is essential if the communicative aims of the Irish syllabus are to be achieved. The use of Irish within the classroom and in all school activities fosters students' understanding of the language as an effective communicative tool rather than a school or examination subject.

Schools should build upon existing good practice regarding the use of the target language in teaching and learning.

Schools should reduce significantly the over-use of translation reported on in a number of cases.

Issues concerning the use of translation in teaching Irish should be discussed with teachers of other modern languages so that a school policy regarding the use of translation in language teaching can be agreed.

Differentiated teaching

Main findings

In general, inspectors identified a need for greater differentiation in teaching so as to cater for the varying needs of students.

Recommendations

Teachers should use differentiated strategies to cater appropriately for the learning needs of all students.

The needs of both weaker and high-achieving students should be considered in planning and organising learning activities. For example, students whose Irish is of a high standard should be given more challenging work in order to foster their continued interest in the subject.

Fostering conversation in classes

Main findings

More than one-third of reports described good practice in fostering conversation in classes. Techniques used included:

- well-chosen questions demanding a personal opinion from students
- differentiated questions consistent with the varying abilities of students

- creating communication opportunities in class
- practising conversation in pairs
- practising items of general conversation at the start of class as normal practice.

Among the practices observed that were a cause for concern were:

- having too great a recourse to translation when speaking in class
- translating the simplest directions into English for competent students
- writing letters in copybooks with an English translation alongside
- emphasising learning through memorisation and translation rather than practising communication
- students speaking the language only when answering the teacher's questions
- oral discussion on reading comprehension work which was limited to the questions in the textbook
- no reference to the opinions or experience of the students relating to the material read and no opportunity given to the students to express them.

Recommendations

Students should be given regular opportunities to practise conversation in order to promote their self-confidence in acquiring the language.

It is recommended that teachers spend more time on fostering conversation and making every effort to provide students with opportunities to speak the language in lessons. Teachers should include oral Irish tasks in homework given to students so as to encourage their participation in class work.

Ensuring lesson content is linked to the lives of students

Main findings

Over half of the inspectors reports commented positively that the subject of the lesson was relevant to the contemporary life of the students, and that this encouraged students to express themselves orally.

Integration of language skills

Main findings

Almost half the reports commented positively on the integrated presentation of language skills. Instances where items of aural comprehension, speaking, reading and writing were practised during the course of a class were particularly praised by inspectors.

Recommendations

Practices that separate the teaching and learning of the four language skills are not conducive to the acquisition of language. Regularly spending an entire class period on one skill, for example, should be avoided.

Lesson themes should be selected so that all language skills may be developed within the theme, rather than practised independently of each other.

Teachers should seek to enrich students' vocabulary thematically, rather than having learners memorise lists of words that are unconnected with current class work.

Teaching of grammar

Main findings

There were positive references to the teaching of grammar in almost 40 of the reports. Inspectors commended instances where the teaching of grammar was integrated into lessons in a natural way.

Concern was shown regarding the teaching of grammar where there was intensive work on one aspect of grammar for an entire class period or where translation to English was taken as a sign of confirming an understanding of grammar.

Recommendations

Class activities should be used to reinforce language structures and idiomatic phrases, so that the teaching of grammar takes place in a meaningful context.

The attention of students (particularly students who have acquired a good knowledge of Irish) should be drawn to the importance of writing grammatically correct Irish.

Pronunciation

Main findings

Pronunciation is a necessary aspect of the correct sounding of words, of aural comprehension and of communication in general, and is a guide to the correct writing of the language. In some reports, examples were cited where pronunciation was skilfully corrected, without disheartening the students.

Recommendations

Teachers should emphasise the development of accuracy in pronunciation, particularly in the early years of the junior cycle, so that students have a better understanding of the relation between the written word and the sound of the word.

Teaching resources

Main findings

The inspectors' reports referred only occasionally to the use of authentic texts.

Some reports noted that textbooks or past examination papers were an integral part of learning in class in a way that was considered to interfere with the acquisition of Irish as a communicative and living language.

The inspectors' reports referred only occasionally to the use of information and communication technology in teaching and learning.

Student input in the creation of an attractive learning environment, through the display of their work in the subject on the classroom walls, was praised highly in a small number of reports.

Recommendations

Schools should use authentic texts, including extracts from communication and broadcast media in Irish, to present the language as a communicative and living language.

Short extracts from the Irish language broadcast media should be used with students rather than items of aural comprehension from past examination papers or past aural comprehension tests.

The use of past examination papers as class texts should be avoided until absolutely necessary.

Teachers should use other resources as an alternative to an excessive use of textbooks in class work.

Greater use should be made of ICT in the teaching and learning of Irish. Students should be given opportunities to view the extent of Irish available on internet websites. This material associates Irish with the contemporary world rather than with textbooks and examination papers. ICT may also be used to create links with other schools and learners of Irish.

Students should receive guidance in the correct use of the dictionary, including electronic dictionaries (like www.acmhainn.ie, www.focal.ie and the CD *WinGléacht*), so as to foster their responsibility for their own learning.

Student engagement and learning

Main findings

The level of student engagement in lessons was commented upon favourably in almost half the reports. This engagement was attributed to:

- the implementation of a range of enjoyable activities in class
- work sheets and other ready-made materials in use
- students active in their own learning
- role-play, work in pairs, debate work
- students being given responsibility for their own learning.

Inspectors expressed concerns about the level of student engagement in lessons where:

- the preponderance of speaking in class was done by the teacher
- the tasks of the class were too limited
- the emphasis on the use of textbooks was too great.

In some reports, inspectors expressed concerns that a very limited amount of time was being spent on conversational work in comparison with the amount of time spent on reading from the textbook or on other written work.

A third of the reports refer to limited oral ability being shown by students.

Recommendations

Active learning opportunities should be used within Irish lessons.

It is recommended that students are given greater responsibility for their learning, especially opportunities to practise speaking the language among themselves and to practise questions.

One-sided situations, where the teacher does most of the talking in class, should be avoided.

Team-teaching and other professional development

Main findings

A limited number of reports noted that teachers were involved in team-teaching in certain classes in order to test, review and promote methodologies. This practice was praised by inspectors as a way of improving professional teaching standards.

Recommendations

Inspectors believed that it would be valuable if teachers shared their professional expertise in language teaching, and recommended that opportunities to do this locally should be explored.

Inspectors also noted the possibilities that teachers could share responsibility for the teaching of various language skills with the same class where classes were timetabled at the same time in a school.

6.4 The quality of assessment

The lack of assessment of students' oral language skills was the most significant finding noted by inspectors and the issue about which most recommendations were made. In general, the inspectors commented positively about other aspects of assessment, while making some significant recommendations for improvement in certain areas.

Assessment of oral language skills

Main findings

Inspections found that only written assessments were used to identify the learning needs of incoming first-year students and to help teachers to plan for those needs.

The great majority of reports stated that assessment of oral Irish did not form part of the assessment undertaken with junior cycle classes.

The reason most often mentioned to inspectors for not assessing oral Irish as part of schools' in-house examinations was that there was no assessment of oral language skills in the Junior Certificate examination.

An assessment, albeit limited, of oral Irish was undertaken in only twenty-one of the seventy-five schools in the study.

In 2005 only three of the seventy-five schools (4%) in which inspections were carried out submitted applicants for the optional oral examination available as part of the Junior Certificate Irish examination.

A number of teachers and principals stated that they would welcome the inclusion of an oral examination as a core element of the Junior Certificate Irish examination.

Recommendations

Schools should review the nature and function of assessment used with incoming first year students. The assessment of incoming first-year students should be informed by the contents of the *Primary School Curriculum*. Given the emphasis on oral language in both the students' learning to this point and in the junior cycle syllabus, the assessment of oral language skills should be an element of the assessment of these students.

The assessment of oral language skills should be a core element of assessment practice for all junior cycle classes. Irrespective of the requirements of the certificate examinations, the development of oral language skills is an essential element in the acquisition of the language and this should be reflected in oral assessments based on a broad range of topics relating to the life of the student.

Schools may find the recommendations on promoting and assessing languages contained in the NCCA publication *Languages in the Post-primary Curriculum* (Little, 2003, pp.28-34 and 37-42) useful when reviewing their assessment arrangements.

Other aspects of assessment

Main findings

In general, the inspectors' reports commented positively on the correction of homework, on copybook work and on formative guidance.

The extent and quality of homework was praised by inspectors, as was the diligence of students' work as seen in copybooks.

The administration of common in-house test examinations at the same levels in the subject was cited as good practice. Inspectors noted that this facilitated valid comparisons between the achievements of students in various classes and the consequent movement of students from one class level to another, if necessary.

The arrangements in place for reporting to parents about the progress of students received consistent praise in the inspectors' reports.

Recommendations

It is important that students receive information on their progress in all the language skills and on their learning needs.

Guidance should be given to students as part of the corrections made on their work so that they know what they have done well or correctly and how they can improve their work and make better progress. Such good practice should be extended. This would help to give students a better understanding of themselves as learners and greater clarity about their individual learning needs.

Existing good practice, where common in-house examinations are agreed for classes undertaking Irish at the same levels, should be extended.

Schools should undertake a comprehensive analysis of participation rates at the various levels in the subject and of the achievements of their students in the subject at the Junior Certificate examination. A copy of this analysis should be provided to the staff in the Irish department. This information should inform collaborative planning and the review of teaching and learning skills.



Appendix

Junior Certificate Examination, 2003 – 2006

The number and percentage of applicants who took English and Irish in the Junior Certificate examinations in 2003-2006 inclusive are shown below. The difference between the numbers taking English and Irish is shown in the final row, entitled “gap”. See Chapter 2, section 2.3 for a discussion of these statistics.

English

	2003	2004	2005	2006
Higher Level	37,023 (63%)	35,593 (63.5%)	36,172 (65%)	37,145 (65%)
Ordinary Level	19,072 (32.5%)	18,087 (32%)	17,551 (31%)	17,716 (31%)
Foundation Level	2,621 (4.5%)	2,537 (4.5%)	2,302 (4%)	2,264 (4%)
Total	58,716	56,217	56,025	57,125

Irish

	2003	2004	2005	2006
Higher Level	22,136 (41%)	21,072 (41.5%)	21,736 (43%)	21,953 (43%)
Ordinary Level	26,977 (50%)	25,752 (50.5%)	24,990 (50%)	25,440 (50%)
Foundation Level	4,866 (9%)	4,181 (8%)	3,592 (7%)	3,478 (7%)
Total	53,979	51,005	50,318	50,871
Gap	4,737 (8%)	5,212 (9%)	5,707 (10%)	6,254 (11%)



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Useful websites

A sample list is given below of websites relating to educational and Irish language issues. There are links to other sites on many of these sites.

Education sector

www.education.gov.ie

Department of Education and Science

www.ncca.ie

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

www.examinations.ie

State Examinations Commission

www.sdpi.ie

School Development Planning Initiative (See "Resource material")

www.cogg.ie

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (Council for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium Education)

www.slss.ie

Second Level Support Service

www.comhar.ie

Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge (Association of Teachers of Irish)

Electronic dictionaries

www.focal.ie

Electronic Irish-English and English-Irish dictionary

www.acmhainn.ie

Special dictionaries on various subjects

Broadcast media

www.tg4.ie

TG4

www.tg4.ie/Dram/dram.htm

Downloadable class lessons based on the television programme "Ros na Rún"

www.rte.ie/rnag

Raidió na Gaeltachta

www.rte.ie

Raidió Teilifís Éireann

www.bbc.co.uk/irish/blas

BBC (Northern Ireland)

www.rnl106.com

Raidió na Life

Print media

www.foinse.ie

Foinse (weekly newspaper)

www.nuacht.com

Lá (daily newspaper)

www.comhar-iris.ie

Comhar (monthly magazine)

Public sector

www.irlgov.ie

Government website (with links to other sites)

www.coimisineir.ie

An Coimisinéir Teanga (Language Commissioner)

www.pobail.ie

Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

www.leabhar.ie

Bord na Leabhar Gaeilge (Board to support writers and publishers of books in Irish)

Books and publishers

www.litriocht.com

Bard na nGleann (an extensive list of materials in Irish)

www.cic.ie

Cló Iar-Chonnachta

www.coislife.ie

Cois Life

www.leabhar.com

Cló Mhaigh Eo

www.moinin.ie

Móinín

www.corca-dhuibhne.com

Comharchumann Forbartha Chorca Dhuibhne

www.fiosfeasa.com

Fios Feasa (computer programmes in Irish)

Irish language organisations

www.gaeilge.ie

Foras na Gaeilge (with other links)

www.cnag.ie

Conradh na Gaeilge

www.beo.ie

Oideas Gael (news material)

www.gael-linn.ie

Gael-Linn

www.gaelport.ie

Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge

www.gaelchultur.com

Gaelchultúr Teoranta