

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Spanish  
REPORT**

**Saint Raphaela's Secondary School  
Stillorgan, County Dublin  
Roll number: 60361V**

**Date of inspection: 25 March 2010**



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

**REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPANISH**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Raphaela's Secondary School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Spanish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students' work. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

St Raphaela's is an all-girls' Catholic voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart, whose founder, St. Raphaela Mary, originated from Córdoba in Spain. As part of the Post-Primary Languages Initiative, Spanish was introduced into the school eleven years ago as a Transition Year (TY) module and is now offered throughout the school. The school is very supportive of languages in general. Both Spanish and French are offered at both junior cycle and senior cycle, and in recent years Japanese has been introduced into senior cycle, with a number of students taking the subject for the Leaving Certificate examination. There are also plans to introduce Latin into the curriculum. Students choose either Spanish or French prior to entry into the school in first year and it is very positive that they continue their study of this language through to Leaving Certificate level. Due to current timetabling arrangements, students cannot take two language subjects in junior cycle, but those students who wish to take two languages at Leaving Certificate level can do so. It is good to note that students with special educational needs are encouraged to study a modern European language. It is recommended that the system of choosing a language prior to entry in first year, together with the junior cycle timetabling arrangements for languages, be kept under review, so that any students who wish to study two languages in junior cycle can be accommodated. Given the high profile of the study of languages within the school it may be a good idea, over time, to develop an overall languages' policy for the school, and this could include an acknowledgement and support for newcomer home languages.

Uptake for Spanish is good, both at junior cycle and at senior cycle. Two fully qualified teachers of Spanish make up the Spanish team. The time allocation for the subject is very good, with four single periods allocated to junior cycle classes, three single periods to TY, five single periods to fifth year and six periods to sixth year, with a good spread over the week in all cases. Resources for the language are provided for on a needs basis and a good bank of teaching materials for

Spanish has been built up, including DVDs, magazines, taped recordings of native speakers and a good variety of authentic Spanish listening and reading material. The teachers share these resources which are mostly stored in the main Spanish classroom, which has been equipped with a data projector, laptop, CD player/tape recorder, video and ample storage space. The fact that classrooms are mostly teacher-based provides an opportunity to create a rich learning environment for the language. It was very positive to see a notice board for Spanish outside the main Spanish classroom, with posters and projects carried out by TY students on display. Access to information and communication technology (ICT) is very good, with internet access both in the classroom and in the computer room which can be booked for language classes. The school is building up ICT provision and has recently purchased two interactive whiteboards for teachers' use, with training planned for those teachers who require it. All of this is very positive.

Management encourages the continuing professional development of members of staff, as evidenced by its support of teachers' membership of subject-related professional organisations. The school analyses students' learning outcomes and this informs planning. It was evident from classroom practice observed during the evaluation that support for students with special educational needs in the school is good. Differentiated tasks are provided for those students who would benefit from them and in-class support is provided for students of Spanish when needed.

As the trustees of the school are Spanish, links with Spain are very strong and every year the school welcomes a number of students from the associated schools in Spain. Many students from St Raphaela's have been encouraged to avail of these links to spend time in Spain, either working or on an exchange visit. The school has arranged school tours to Spain in recent years and students are also given the opportunity to attend a language and adventure weekend course in Ireland. Last year, the Spanish department organised Spanish lessons for several members of staff. All of this contributes to maintaining a high profile for Spanish in the school. As ICT has created opportunities for computer-mediated communication between language learners, the school is encouraged to look at ways of using ICT to further develop live links with a partner school in Spain.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

It is reported that subject development planning is ongoing in the school and that work has been carried out on a subject plan for Spanish, although this plan was not made available during the evaluation. A co-ordinator for the subject has been assigned and, although no minutes of meetings were provided during the evaluation, it is reported that subject department meetings are held regularly and minutes recorded. From lessons observed, it is evident that there is good overall long-term planning for each year group. The comprehensive TY programme includes a variety of activities which reflect the aims and ethos of Transition Year, such as project work, student research, current affairs, web quests, an emphasis on oral and aural skills and a rich cultural content.

It was evident, from the observation of lessons, that long-term planning for the subject is based on an integrated approach, where both receptive and productive language skills are taught in an integrated manner around a theme or topic, which is recommended practice. It would be of benefit, when further developing the long-term plan, to specify students' learning outcomes for the different language skills for each year group. It is recommended that subject planning should focus on ways of increasing students' active participation during lessons. It would be of benefit to include, within the plan, specific, topic-related, teaching strategies and material resources which

encourage collaborative learning and maximise opportunities for students to use the target language in an authentic and communicative way in the classroom. The further development of differentiated tasks and worksheets would also be of benefit.

In relation to long-term planning for senior cycle, while the non-dependence on a core textbook is positive, it would be important to ensure that the totality of material chosen comprehensively covers the syllabus content, that all four language skills are equally catered for and that students are exposed to a wide variety of suitably challenging reading and listening material. Planning should also aim to provide students with sufficient practice in the skill of productive writing, which should be incorporated in some form into every theme or topic at both junior cycle and senior cycle.

Classes are of mixed-ability groupings and there was evidence during the evaluation of differentiated questioning and tasks being used to accommodate differing levels. In addition to differentiated worksheets and tasks, it is suggested that extra reading material could be made available, for example in magazine racks in the classroom, so that if students finish a task earlier than others in the class, they would have extra reading material to hand. It is also suggested that a bank of supplementary reading material could be built up to include a range of age-appropriate short Spanish novels, such as the prescribed Leaving Certificate text, to give students an insight into the cultural life of young Spanish people as well as providing a richer linguistic experience.

Planning for individual lessons was very good, with a variety of resources prepared in advance of the lesson and used effectively to engage students' attention. In general, lessons were purposeful, well structured and integrated into an overall scheme of work. Teachers demonstrated good awareness of students' abilities and interests and tailored their lessons accordingly.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Overall a good level of teaching and learning was in evidence, with some good examples of the integration of ICT into the classroom. Teachers' use of the target language for classroom communication was good, although a tendency to translate instructions in a few lessons was discouraged. It is recommended that the subject department investigate ways of increasing students' use of the target language; this could be achieved by ensuring that students are taught specific transactional language when starting to study the language and expecting students to use Spanish for classroom interactions. Regular use of the Spanish alphabet by students should be encouraged. It was positive to note that examples of phrases for use in the classroom were displayed on posters on the walls of the classroom.

In some lessons, the aim of the lesson was shared with students at the outset and it is suggested that this good practice could be further developed to include expected learning outcomes (perhaps as 'can-do' statements) with all class groups. Lesson pace was, in general, good, with sufficient content and variety of activities to keep students fully engaged throughout the lesson. In one instance where the pace was slower, it was suggested that more activities could have been introduced into the lesson. Clear progression from previous learning was in evidence.

Very good use was made of visual aids, such as a weather forecast from a Spanish television channel, cue cards for oral practice, photographs and graphics presented on powerpoint, and worksheets. This is greatly encouraged as a means of facilitating learning, encouraging target-language use and aiding retention, particularly in classes of mixed ability. It was suggested in one

instance that it would be of benefit to delay giving students the written version of items of vocabulary so that they have more time to connect the visual stimulus with the sound of the word.

Good reinforcement of learning was provided through a variety of classroom activities, which included practice of the different language skills and included listening exercises, oral practice, one-to-one questioning and productive writing exercises. The introduction of new vocabulary and revision of grammatical constructions were effectively incorporated into the themes of the lessons, with good attention to detail. Students made notes as the lessons progressed. Teachers introduced active-learning strategies, such as pair work, into some lessons, giving individual students more opportunity for speaking the language. The further development of opportunities for active student participation is encouraged in all lessons. Techniques such as getting students to underline key words in texts helped students focus on the task in hand. Aural comprehension exercises were preceded by revision of relevant vocabulary items and follow-up activities, including in some instances giving students copies of the tape-script, helped to reinforce students' understanding. It is suggested that such aural exercises should also provide a focus for one-to-one questioning in the target language and could be used as a springboard for students' oral practice. Appropriate attention was paid to pronunciation and students were given sufficient opportunity to repeat new vocabulary aloud as it was introduced. A focus on specific question words in one lesson was very useful and the suggestion was made in another lesson that a similar focus on the use of question words would be of benefit.

Full advantage has been taken of the teacher-based classroom to create a rich environment for Spanish, with colourful posters, maps, samples of students' work, visual stimuli, vocabulary *aides-mémoire* and key-word lists on the walls. The classroom atmosphere was at all times pleasant and conducive to learning. Classroom management was very good in all instances. Instructions were clear and classroom activities were well organised. Student-teacher rapport was excellent and teachers were uniformly affirming of students' efforts. Teachers circulated in the classroom when students were engaged in learning tasks, giving individual assistance to students as required. In all lessons students were fully engaged throughout and demonstrated good understanding and age-appropriate skills. When questioned, students responded well.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school has an assessment policy in place and good procedures provide for the assessment, recording and reporting of students' progress. Informal assessment of students of Spanish is carried out through class tests, oral questioning, homework tasks and ongoing monitoring of students' work. Formal house-examinations are held twice yearly for non-examination classes, including TY students, and mock examinations are held in the spring for third-year and sixth-year students. Students who require reasonable accommodations (RACE) during certificate examinations are provided with similar accommodations in school house-examinations, which is good practice. Mock oral examinations are provided for fifth-year and sixth-year students and it is good practice that TY students' oral skills are assessed both at Christmas and in the summer. It is recommended that the end-of-year formal assessment of Spanish for all students in both junior and senior cycles should include a mark for students' oral skills, whether as a result of a short oral test or as an overall mark for the student's contribution in class throughout the year.

Homework is assigned regularly and copybooks are well monitored, with examples of formative assessment to aid students' progress. This good practice is encouraged. Copybooks showed evidence of a good level of students' work overall. It is suggested that students be required to

keep a corrected version of their productive writing exercises to facilitate revision purposes. It is very positive that homework assignments focus on developing students' skills and include a variety of types of homework tasks such as accessing a weather report via an internet link, learning vocabulary and listening practice, as well as written exercises.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school is very supportive of languages in general and the uptake of Spanish is good.
- A rich learning environment for the language has been created through wall displays in the classroom and a dedicated Spanish notice board with examples of students' work.
- From the lessons observed, it is evident that there is good overall long-term planning for the subject.
- Planning for individual lessons was very good, with a variety of resources prepared in advance of the lesson and used effectively to engage students' attention.
- Lessons were purposeful, well structured and integrated into an overall scheme of work
- Overall a good level of teaching and learning was in evidence, with very good use being made of visual aids and ICT.
- A variety of classroom activities, which included some pair work, provided good reinforcement of learning.
- Student-teacher rapport was excellent and teachers were uniformly affirming of students' efforts.
- Students were fully engaged throughout and demonstrated good understanding and age-appropriate skills.
- Good procedures are in place to provide for the assessment, recording and reporting of students' progress.

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

- It is recommended that the system of choosing a language prior to entry in first year together with the junior cycle timetabling arrangements for languages be kept under review, so that any students who wish to study two languages in junior cycle can be accommodated.
- It is recommended that the subject department investigate ways of increasing students' use of the target language for classroom interactions.
- It is recommended that subject planning should focus on ways of increasing students' active participation during lessons.
- It is recommended that the end-of-year formal assessment of Spanish for all students in both junior and senior cycles should include a mark for students' oral skills

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal, at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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